

MOSTAFA MAHMOUD

THE QURAN

An Attempt at Modern Reading

MOSTAFA MAHMOUD

THE QURAN

An Attempt at a Modern Reading

translated from Arabic
by
M.M. Enani

Published by. DAR AL-MA'AREF
Cairo, Egypt
2000

In the name of God,
the Merciful, the Compassionate

Dr. Mostafa Mahmoud is by far the leading writer and television speaker on science and religion in the Arab world today. His influence is great, his following immense. He represents the 'spirit of the age' and to understand him is to understand a central current of thought in our part of the world and the way of life that is being formed by that thought.

A best seller in Arabic, this book presents a fresh view of Islam, a new 'reading' of the Quran in the light of modern science and philosophy.

The translator, Dr. M. M. Enani, is an Associate Professor at the University of Cairo. He is a playwright, critic and an experienced translator.

CONTENTS

Translator's Preface

This is an unusual book. It proposes to offer a 'modern', rather than a 'new', reading of the Quran: rather than a different interpretation of the Muslims' Holy Book it gives a 'reading', or a view, to which today's Muslim, armed with knowledge of modern science and modern philosophy, may easily respond. Though its conclusions differ but little from those of the established exegesis, the book differs greatly in its method of approach. It makes use of recent scientific discoveries in the elucidation of many verses hitherto regarded as enigmas, and it unfolds certain concepts of mysticism which make the basic principles of Islam (or, for that matter, of any revealed religion) easier to grasp. It also differs, perhaps more importantly, in the manner in which Dr. Mahmoud shows the relevance of the Quran to the central issues of man in today's world.

I translated the title, rather freely, as a 'reading'--the original Arabic says 'understanding'. Perhaps the Arabic word is more precise, as the author shows that he is genuinely trying to 'understand' the basic questions raised by the Quran, keeping his eye closely on the text but with his vast scientific and philosophical knowledge providing possible avenues for re-interpretation. When a 'question' defeats his best ability he simply says 'God knows' and leaves it at that. The Quran being a Book for all time, the author trusts in posterity to make yet another fresh approach--perhaps the future will provide our children with deeper insights into the meaning of the verses.

It is not, however, so much the answers provided as the questions asked that make this book such an interesting contri-

bution to our thinking about Islam. It is essentially an invitation to thinking: it seeks to query rather than answer, to stimulate rather than satisfy, and, in its peculiar way, to open up new possibilities for approaching religion in a scientific age. It is bold in its challenge to the separation of religion from modern science which appears to have started in the Seventeenth Century.

The only way of 'explaining' something satisfactorily, as Basil Willey has shown **(The Seventeenth Century Background)** is to re-express it in terms of the language (the bent of mind) of a given age. If an age is dominated by religion, religious terms must be used; if the prevalent mode is philosophic, philosophic terms must be substituted; if scientific, scientific terms. Seventeenth-Century Europe accepted science without questioning religion, for Descartes had made belief in God and the Soul axiomatic--hence their exclusion, as Spratt tells us, from the programme of the Royal Society. Thinkers of the age accepted the Cartesian dichotomy (which allowed the parallel existence of science and religion) and so avoided the translation of any religious terms into the language of the nascent, but fast developing, natural sciences. There were exceptions, of course, notably the 'allegorists', but the tendency was not on the whole in favour of 'confusing' religious with scientific terms. In the Age of Reason which now dawned on Europe, Paul Hazard tells us, concepts were re-defined **(The Mind of Europe in the Eighteenth Century)** and vigorous attempts were made to secure the independence of science. By the end of the Eighteenth Century, with its dominant 'mechanical philosophy', religion was reduced to a vague belief in God. Every step science took in the following century seemed to widen the gap further by stressing that science and religion relied on two essentially different mental attitutdes, reflected in their respective methods, which could never be reconciled.

When this book first appeared in Arabic, I casually browsed through it (at a book-stand in Cairo, actually) and my attention was riveted to the chapter on Heaven and Hell. Here was an 'allegorist' following in the footsteps of Grenville and echoing the dissenting voices of the Seventeenth Century, I thought; but, turning to Dr. Mahmoud's handling of Darwinism, I realized that a more serious attempt was being made to beard the lion. It was Darwin, no doubt, who dealt the severest blow to religious concepts by advocating a theory of evolution that did for many decades challenge a central religious concept. How was Dr. Mahmoud to deal with this 'theory'? It was surely an insuperable problem, and my interest was aroused. I wanted to know, first, whether he had recanted his earlier views as a believer in Darwinism and, second, whether, if he still believed in it, he could reconcile it somehow with the 'story of creation' as told by the Quran. It was not, however, until I had read the whole book that I discovered what he was doing. Rather than relinquish his earlier positions, he now re-defined his terms, much in the same way as the linguistic philosophers had done (though with different results). He believes unquestioningly in the Quran's God, but does not reject the various avenues that lead to God--Spinoza's, Russell's, Einstein's, and Jung's! The ultimate truth about God is hidden from us and belongs in the Unseen; but the essential truth of His existence can be apprehended in many ways, not least of which is the 'heart'--Kant's 'inner self', Wordsworth's 'thinking heart' or Shelley's 'feeling intellect'. The trouble with man's thinking is that it relies too much on language; in the few instances when man recognizes the 'sad incompetence of human speech' his thought processes break down and communication becomes impossible. But communication or no communication man does apprehend the truth and it does get across to other men. In the chapter on God's Names,

Dr. Mahmoud states that the fault lies in our traditional patterns of thinking, especially in our tendency to deal with the 'truth' in terms of the out-dated materialistic science of the last century. Indeed, even today physicists have, under its influence, adopted the notion that to be real a thing must be of the same nature as a piece of matter (Lange, F.A., **The History of Materialism**). Matter was conceived of as 'something lying out there in space', Professor C.E.M. Joad tells us,

> It was hard (he says), simple and obvious; indubitably it was real, and as such calculated to form an admirable foundation upon which the horse sense of the practical man could base his irrefragable convictions. Now matter was something which one could see and touch. It followed that whatever else was real must be of the same nature as that which one could theoretically see and touch. Hence, to enquire into the nature of things we saw and touched, to analyse them into their elements and atoms, was to deal directly with reality: to apprehend values or to enjoy religious experience was to wander in a world of shadows.
>
> (**Guide to Modern Thought,** pp. 15–16)

Parallel with this view was the belief, inherited from the Eighteenth Century, that reality must be subject to the laws which operated in the physical world--that it must work, in short, like a machine. As Professor Eddington has put it, Nineteenth- Century science was disposed, as soon as it scented a piece of mechanism, to exclaim, 'Here we are getting to bedrock. This is what things should resolve themselves into. This is ultimate reality' (**Science and the Unseen World,** p. 21). The implication was, we are told, that whatever did not

show itself amenable to mechanistic causation--value, for instance, or the feeling of moral obligation, or the sense of deity--was not quite real. It was a question of distinguishing what was real, 'scientific' and therefore 'acceptable' (cf. C. Cohen's **Materialsim Restated)** from what appeared to be unreal and was thus regarded as 'unscientific' and 'unacceptable'.

Modern science has, however, challenged this whole way of thinking--and Dr. Mahmoud is well aware of this. 'Modern matter is something', Joad explains, 'infinitely attenuated and elusive; it is a heap in space time, a 'mush' of electricity, a wave of probability undulating into nothingness; frequently it turns out not to be matter at all but a projection of the consciousness of its perceiver' (**ibid.,** p. 17). There is now no need for those who accept the results of the physical sciences to write off, as they had once to write off, as subjective illusions the promptings of the moral and aesthetic sides of their natures, **and the Nineteenth-Century gulf between science and religion is** in a fair way to be bridged. Indeed, there's many a modern scientist who confidently asserts that science supports religion, many a religious 'thinker' who upholds the findings of science as vindicating belief in the Unseen. The only conclusion a neutral observer--an agnostic or an atheist--may be justified in drawing is the negative one that the 'reasons which physical science was formerly thought to provide for supposing that religion was necessarily false no longer obtain, and the way is, therefore, open for a reconsideration of the religious interpretation of the universe on merits' (Joad, **ibid**). Such a reconsideration has been frequently undertaken with varying degress of success. The point of departure also varied, and Dr. Mahmoud's early atheism has been regarded as a bold enough start; his real start was, I believe, his discovery (not re-discovery) of the Quran.

His beginnings as a liberal intellectual may be traced back to the late 1950's and early 1960's when his weekly articles, his **Midnight Journals**, on science and philosophy, attracted large sections of the reading public in the Arab world. These were 'musings', pure and simple, never restricted by the 'systems' of the professional philosophers. Indeed, he never claimed to be one, never dabbled in epistemology, ethics or logic. A physician by training, he read avidly, roaming at will from anatomy to astronomy, from biology to zoogeography. His articles reflected the variety of the points of view adopted and the open mind with which he approached all questions of science and human thought. He was, besides, a successful author who churned out novel after novel, play after play, and relished the controversies that most of them aroused. His audience were therefore puzzled to find him change course; they had expected him to declare the inadequacy of science now that he accepted religion, but heard him uphold modern science even more vigorously, maintaining that it pointed out the road to the ultimate truth.

It has been mentioned that it was a 'spiritual crisis' that made him turn to religion; but how are we to define that term, if definable at all? One approach is to do it by negation: it was not his illness, for he had been cured long before he started his **Midnight Journals**; and it was neither 'personal' in the sense that J.S. Mill's was nor 'political' in the sense that Wordsworth's 'moral crisis' was. It could only have been intellectual; but then the intellectual crises of all great philosophers that lead them back to God contain elements that are definitely non-intellectual. Whatever it was, the experience of reading the Quran was the light that unexpectedly drove away the shadows. The uncertainties of science melted away like morning fog before the sure light of revelation, he tells us. The achievements of the natural sciences supported the knowledge that 'came from

above'; but, being subject to perpetual alteration and modification, scientific findings confirmed the inadequacy of science as the only tool of unravelling the mysteries of existence. Man has been strenuously endeavouring to understand himself and the universe only to be baffled by the inexplicable phenomena both within and without. In fact, the more man's knowledge, the more he realizes how little he has known and the more his knowledge is called in question: new areas of the unknown seem to open up indefinitely. But it was not to conquer those areas that Dr. Mahmoud went to religion, for he admits man's need to believe in the Unknown--the Unseen. It was rather like going to nature--man's nature and God's nature; it was, he tells us, a 'natural' thing to listen to his heart and then to see what his mind had to say about it. And that was his real start.

His work has since been heuristic. His earliest steps were, of course, cautious (which is natural enough); but even after he had acquired his characteristic sure-footedness, Dr. Mahmoud's method continued to be exploratory. He says he is trying to understand the Quran, never claiming to have fully understood it. His style reflects his exploratory method and, with its 'obstinate questionings', has presented considerable difficulties in translation. Most formidable was the difficulty of finding a satisfactory English version for the Quranic verses cited in the book.

English readers must be used to hearing that it is impossible to translate the Quran (because it contains the words of God which are peculiar to the language in which they were revealed), though a good linguist may reproduce the meaning of the words for the benefit of non-Arab Muslims. Consequently, scholars have shied away from the word 'translation' in favour of 'interpretation'. As commonly defined, however, 'interpreta-

tion' is confined to the conveyance of the most obvious sense, though, in Islamic studies, interpretation is the discipline of capturing the most elusive, most unobvious, senses of a given text. Muslim Interpreters have produced, still produce, different meanings of many a seemingly straightforward verse, and commentators have defended one or another of these. 'Interpretation' seems to me a no less objectionable word than 'translation', in so far as it involves a subjective element. What we are looking for in English is a word which indicates the 'reproduction of meaning' without implying that the foreign version may be regarded as equivalent or a substitute for the original. Now in the absence of such a word, and because no translator or interpreter can credibly claim to be able to produce an equivalent text in a foreign language, any word will do--translation, interpretation, rendering or what have you!

As Muslims, our freedom to 'interpret' the Quran is severely restricted. We are guided by the views of the Prophet's Companions and immediate successors, and the exegesis produced down the centuries by trustworthy Muslim scholars. Without such guidance any attempt at 'interpretation' will produce strange, if not wrong, results. At one time the problem of attaining the right interpretation (or the most obvious meaning) appeared to have been solved. Few scholars would disagree today on the 'surface' meaning of a given verse. But, as our understanding of our language improves and our knowledge of ourselves and the universe increases, the hidden meaning of many verses appears and, with it, the need for the interpreter and translator alike to give both obvious and hidden meanings at once. Can this be done without risking verbosity, ambiguity and even vagueness?

It has been suggested that as the Quran is not a Book addressed solely to the mind the ideals of precision, economy

and lucidity (highly admired in English) may be sacrificed and a language akin to the language of poetry may be used. Strange as it may seem, these very ideals are upheld by the Quran in every verse, though what is lucid and precise may appear enigmatic and inexplicable. True, the Quran occasionally resorts to the evocation of certain 'states of mind' and the translator may feel justified in using the 'language of poetry'--but which language of poetry? Doesn't this change from one age to another, from one generation to the next, even from poet to poet? May we equate the language of Milton with that of Herrick? Or, to cite contemporary examples, the language of Larkin with that of Hughes? Perhaps we can use the 'poetic devices' which all poets have used (metre, imagery, fluid syntax etc.)? But don't these again vary greatly in practice from one poet to another--to the extent that unless you are a poet yourself you will never hope to use poetic language? Doesn't a poet in a large measure make his own language?

No; poetic language, whatever our definition of it may be, will not do. Revealed in the language actually spoken by the Arabs, the Quran was so unique in its 'natural eloquence' that it impressed them immediately as inimitable. It is not in verse but is higher in poetic quality than anything their renowned and acknowledged poets had ever produced. And, notwithstanding the development of modern Arabic, today's reader is still struck by the uniqueness of Quranic expression. It is prose of a special kind: it has rhythm without being metrical; it has imagery without being poetic; and it is precise without being 'scientific' (cf. chapters I & XIV). Quranic translation has not developed into a science in the way that Biblical translation has, but I trust that in the fullness of time the questions I have raised here will be dealt with by the abler minds of the linguists.

For the verses quoted, I have done my best to follow the original text as far as possible, even whilst attempting to give

the reader a feeling of the original Arabic, particularly in Chapter I. I have relied almost totally on Arberry's excellent 'interpretation' in congunction with Yusuf Ali's magnificent rendering. I found Picktall's version of the 'meaning' of the Quran very useful. Sometimes I had to adjust my understanding of a given verse to that of Dr. Mahmoud, sometimes my own reading differed from his and the difference was immediately pointed out parenthetically or was absorbed in the text. I do hope I have not done violence to the meaning intended or departed from the truth; of the Quran God says, 'None but God knoweth its interpretation'.

* * *

As this book is not addressed to the scholar or the specialist but rather to the layman, the style I have aimed at is the 'familiar style' in Hazlitt's sense. I do not know if I have succeeded. I often found myself uncontrollably slipping into colloquial English, and I did not resist the temptation, particularly as Dr. Mahmoud's style encouraged it. Though an Arabic stylist of a very high standing, his eloquence is due not to the invariable elevation of his style but to the fact that he can vary his style to suit his audiences. In one or two chapters he departs from the familiar style to use his own brand of poetic style - elliptic, allusive and so difficult to reproduce in English. Though I did my best to avoid the stilted language of the pedants, learned words did creep in. I only hope that the media have sufficiently popularized most of them.

Perhaps a final word of warning. Though addressed to Muslims familiar with the basic ideas of Islam, this book will be read, no doubt, by other men of different religions (or no religion at all) and it is to them that the following remarks are addressed. The similarities in thought and language between the

Quran and other Holy Scriptures are only natural: Muslims recognize all God's Prophets and Apostles and are commanded by the Quran to regard them as belonging to ONE religion-- God's. This is, incidentally, why I have followed Arberry and Youssef Ali in referring to God as God rather than Allah as the latter term might suggest a different Muslim concept or a god peculiar to Muslims or, indeed, another entity altogether. Since it is the God of Moses and Jesus Christ that we believe in, I saw no reason for substituting the Arabic word.

Similarities with other religious creeds, revealed or unrevealed, are also natural. The Quran speaks the language of the human heart wherever man is found and whatever the age in which he lives; it is a universal language rooted deep in man's natural constitution. Muslim mystics, in particular, will be found to share a good deal with mystics of all religions, but certian differences must be stressed. Dr. Mahmoud never uses words like pantheism, panentheism or immanence because of their connotations in mystical writings (cf. J. Boehme's **Six Theosophical Points,** to give a prominent example). He appears at times to suggest one or more of these concepts, though a firm believer in God's transcendence, and man's free will. Determinism is rejected, except as applied to the inanimate universe: of all God's creatures man enjoys the unique freedom to disobey Him: God's will is done in the end, of course, and man is seen as an instrument of enacting it. Again the word predestination is avoided in favour of foreknowledge; and, though they must amount to the same thing when applied to God (for God to know beforehand is to have predestined), the difference is there and it must be maintained.

Some Arabic words have been given in transliteration and their meaning (often various meanings) explained. An Arabic

word may have different but distantly related etymological and idiomatic meanings and the former may thus throw light on the latter. The phonetic transcription of Arabic words may also help the reader to relate the meanings of words sharing the same 'root' but hitherto thought unrelated. The Arabic words for 'prayer' and for 'link' are **Salah** and **Silah** respectively. The Arabic for the Day of Resurrection is **Yawm al-Qiyamah**, where **qiyamah** literally means 'rising' and is closely related, etymologically, to one of God's most beautiful names--**Qayyoum**, often translated loosely as Everlasting. But **Qayyoum** means in one context 'to whom we shall **rise**', in another the Overseer, from the root verb **Qama** which, when used with the preposition **ala** (over), means to oversee. In yet another context it means the Ever-Awake, as in the verse of the Chair **(The Cow,** 255) where it is followed by the decisive 'Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep'; it is here an emphatic adjective derived from the same verb **qama** (to rise, to be awake).

Other Arabic words given in transliteration are those already accepted in English such as the **jinn,** being the plural of **jinnee,** and **efreet** or **ifreet** which refers to a class or category of the **jinn**. The common rendering of any of these as 'spirits' seems to me unsatisfactory, for the word 'spirit' must be reserved for its specific sense as the immaterial side of man, the power of immortal life breathed into man by God.

I have avoided footnotes altogether; they are interruptive and unnecessary. They often create an air of erudition or academic scholarship which would be incompatible with a book of this kind. References to the Quran are given immediately after the verses; but other cross-references are given in the main text.

I hope that the readers will correct and forgive my mistakes; and I take full responsibility for any flaws in the English version of this book.

M.M. Enani
Cairo, 1983

In the name of God, the Merciful,
the Compassionate

Surely in that is a reminder
To him who has a heart
Or will give ear
With a present mind!

Holy Quran

Chapter I

The Quranic Structure

My earliest memories of the Quran go back to schooldays. A child of four, I sat down in Shaykh Mahmoud's Quranic Teaching school among many others of my age and looked blankly at a blackboard on which a few words were scribled in chalk. Shaykh Mahmoud held a long pointer which moved from one word to the next as he recited:

> By the bright forenoon
> And the brooding night;

We repeated after him, automatically, but could never understand what 'forenoon' meant or why the night should be 'brooding'. The words were repeated all the same as pleasant combinations of mysterious syllables.

My mind could be compared at the time to a 'white sheet': it was literally 'blank' or, in an important sense, 'pure'. I received no 'home education' of any kind but was brought up in a family that believed in independence. Each child was free to do what he liked, and to like what he wanted, free from 'adult' influences. I failed my exams in my first school year, I remember, three times in a row but nobody said anything. My exercise books bore painful witness to this: a big 'zero' adorned them lesson after lesson but it evoked no reaction beyond amusement. Asked about my performance I often found it boring to explain how the 'zero' came to be there or even to mention that a new 'zero' had been won; I simply said, 'the usual', and everybody laughed.

This was how things were at home. No force was used to make us erudite or religious; each one had his own life to live and his own responsibilities to bear. Our family differed from many others which resorted to brainwashing and crammed the young minds with information and religious belief under threat of whip and stick. The first verse of the Quran was therefore completely new to me; it had the same charm of novelty as arithmetic and geography. Just as the strange business of the round earth and the five continents floating about like islands in the oceans fascinated me; and just as the idea that while the moon revolved about the earth and the earth about the sun they were all somehow suspended in the sky baffled me, the Quran had a mysterious effect upon me. Indeed, 'mysterious' is the only word capable of describing that effect. The sound of the verse quoted above still echoed in my mind and the words haunted me. Other verses had a similar, though perhaps more inscrutable, effect: they would intrude on my consciousness in the silence of the night, and I would hear my own inner voice in the recesses of the dark reciting:

> Then came a man
> From the farthest part of the city,
> Scurrying...

The verses had a force of their own, a life of their own, as though they were independent beings. I was of course ignorant of the man who came from the farthest part of the city, just as I was of the bright forenoon and the brooding night, but the words still rang loud and the sound had a peculiar effect like an enchanted musical note. Without realizing it I had, young as I was, discovered the internal music of the Quranic verbal structure.

This is, I believe, one of the subtlest aspects of Quranic structure. There is no end-rhyme to help the verbal pattern, nor is the Quran written in verse, but the prose is so unique that a

law of verbal 'architectonics' will be found to govern its internal musical pattern. Like other classical languages, Arabic celebrates external verbal music and Arabic poetry is remarkable for its verse rhythms. An example, in translation, may help to illustrate this:

He questioned me, importunately,
That maid you love, so passionately,
Is Ruby her name? Do answer me!

The beat or the rhythm is only too obvious and is reinforced by the quality of consonants (and, indeed, the vowels) which the poet is using; the division of the sentence into equal parts is equally reinforced by the caesura in each line; and the rhythm is no less reinforced by the parallel sounds within the line. All these features combine, in short, to create an air of regularity which is easy to explain in accordance with the established science of phonetics. Now though it is impossible to reproduce or give an approximation of the original Quranic sounds in translation, you may feel the difference between the line of verse quoted above and the Quranic lines:

By the bright forenoon
And the brooding night
Thy Lord hath not foresaken thee!

It is the internal music here that strikes you, which may be difficult to define. And this is true, in fact, of many Quranic verses:

He, the All-Compassionate
Sat himself upon the Throne;

Taha, 5

He said: my Lord, behold
The bones within me, feeble,
My head aflame with hoariness,
Nor was I, in calling on Thee
Ever in Misery;

Mary, 4

The Hour is coming: I would conceal it
That every soul may be recompensed
For its labours.

Taha, 15

Whomsoever comes unto his Lord
A sinner, for him awaits Gehenna
Wherein he shall neither die nor live.

Taha, 74

Each verse has its own individual musical pattern which corresponds to, if it is not governed by, the semantic structure. This peculiarity of the Quran has not been adequately studied, perhaps because the science of modern linguistics (and semantics) is still in its early stages. The Arabic text actually affords infinite possibilities for such studies. See how the semantic structure 'feeds' the verbal pattern, even as adumbrated in translation:

We revealed unto Moses:
Go with my servants by night;
Strike for them a path in the sea, dry;
Fear no overtaking, comprehend no
fear;

Taha, 77–79

It is perhaps this quality that makes the Quran inimitable. How could anyone hope to produce verbal structures similar, even remotely, to those of the Quran without producing the semantic structures (i.e. the ideas) governing the internal patterns? The style of the Quran, so different from any pre-Islamic writing, remains impossible to imitate (notwithstanding the attempts by the enemies of Islam to cast doubt on this very quality). The fact is that insofar as no human speech has been able to approximate the rhetorical brilliance of the Quran, its style must have a source beyond human power. Listen to this:

Most High in rank He, Lord of the
  Throne,
Sends down the Spirit
Of His bidding, upon whom He will
Of His servants
To warn of the Day of Encounter.

Forgiver of Sins, 15

Splitter of the grain and the date-stone
Brings forth the living from the dead
And brings forth the dead from the
  living

Cattle, 95

Splitter of the sky into dawn
Has made the night--a repose,
The Sun and Moon--a reckoning;

Cattle, 96

He knows the treachery of the eyes
And what the hearts conceal

Forgiver of Sins, 19

The eyes attain Him not, but
He attains the eyes

Cattle, 103

Our Lord embraces all things in His knowledge

The Battlements, 89

Or consider how the following concise verse--

Knower of the Unseen and the visible,
The All-Great, All-Exalted

Thunder, 9

Dispute they about God
Who is mightiest in power?

Thunder, 13

Lead to:

With Him are the keys of the Unseen
None knows them but He
He knows what is in land and sea,
Not a leaf falls but He knows it;
Not a grain in the earth shadows,
Not a thing, fresh or withered,
But it is in a Book manifest.

Cattle, 59

Perhaps contributing to the uniqueness of the Quranic verbal structure, though to be distinguished from the message of the Holy Book itself, is the quality of grandeur. By this is meant semantic magnitude or scale. Listen to the words which conclude the story of the flood:

It was said:
'Earth, swallow thy waters;
Heavens, abate;'
The waters subsided:
It was done.

Hood, 44

They are 'words' indeed, simple and straightforward, but each is impregnated with meanings impossible to transmit in any other verbal formula. Each has the weight of unearthly utterance: 'Swallow thy waters: Abate!'--the weight of mystery, the Unseen, the unknown, the unimaginable. 'It was said... It was done'! Let us quote the lines in full again:

It was said:
'Earth! Swallow thy waters;
Heavens, Abate;'
The waters subsided: it was done.

Can you substitute any other words **and** produce the same effect? Can you create the same impression, whatever your linguistic virtuosity, by using the same number of words? This is, obviously, impossible, for the words, though few, are comparable only to unearthly powers. And that was why the Quran was regarded as a miraculous linguistic performance by the Arabs of the Sixth Century who were exceptionally gifted for literary expression. Even the enemies of Islam had to admit its 'unusual' character. A professional 'man of letters' who was never converted to Islam, al-Waleed Ibn al-Mugheerah conceded as much. Believing Muhammad to be the author of the Quran, he admitted:

> "By God! His words have beauty and charm; their sound fascinates, their meaning captivates; they soar so high and you could never go higher."

Asked to calumniate Muhammad, al-Mugheerah said:

> "You could say he is a magician whose words have power to make a man abandon his father's creed, to rebel against his family, and break away from his entire community."

So, 'magic' was the worst that could be applied to the Quran by a professed enemy of it. If the language of the Quran does not strike us today as equally 'fascinating', the reason is that we have grown too familiar with it. We have been brought up to hear the Quran with blunted ears. Equally blunted by the low, spoken Arabic dialects and stereotyped written Arabic, our ears cannot feel the grandeur of real **high** Arabic. Furthermore, the manner of reciting the Quran by professional 'reciters' is so dull and monotonous that expressions of sorrow, joy and warning are given without the least variation of tone or pitch. There are professional 'chanters', too, who compete in setting the verses of the Quran to a kind of 'melody' that hardly accords with the meaning of the words. There are occasions when the Quran is recited as a routine, that is, without giving prominence to any of its features. Needless to say, the pattern of contemporary life makes man too worldly, too self-involved, too materialistic and, indeed, too apathetic to be conscious of the rich spiritual life of the Quran.

I nevertheless believe that a man can always extricate himself from his quotidian, mundane existence to recover a moment of childhood purity. Even in the midst of worldly preoccupations we can occasionally regain enough purity to relish the uniqueness of Quranic structure. Though fourteen centuries old, Quranic verses may sound as though they have been revealed today.

Listen to the way in which the Quran describes sexual intercourse. A word is used which is so delicate and so gentle that it is impossible to translate. Indeed, no other language (so far as I know) could produce a similar word, not to say an exact equivalent or substitute. Here is the verse in question:

> When he enveloped her, she bore a
> light burden.
>
> **The Battlements,** 189

The word 'envelop' is borrowed in Arabic from the movement of light and shade, from the mixing of colours--the night envelops the day, and one colour is said to envelop (i.e. to melt into) another. It is a word that implies the unity, even the identity, that emerges in the act of love. Can a mortal mind improve on it?

There is another category of words in the Quran which are so suggestive that images arising from their sound and echoes vibrate in the imagination. Swearing by the night and day, God says:

> By the night, stalking, whispering,
> By the day, breathing;

The Darkening, 17–18

How else could you render the quiet of the night and the quickening light of Dawn? You could almost hear the daybreak as well as see it--the twittering of the sparrow and the cockcrowing. But if giving a warning or a threat, the words would almost 'explode'; the verbal structure reverberates with meanings which, thunder-like, rock its own building:

> and as for Ad, they were destroyed by a wind clamorous, violent that He compelled against them uninterruptedly seven nights and eight days, and thou mightest see the people laid prostrate in it, as if they were the stumps of fallen down palm-trees.

The Indubitable, 6–7

In fact the Arabic words give us the howling of the wind, the fluttering of camp canvass, images of fallen palm trees and a

vast scene of desolation, so succinctly that no equivalent words may be found for them in any other language. And this is why the Quran is an untranslatable book. In Arabic it is truly the Quran; in other languages it is not. A verse settles it:

> We have revealed it to you:
> The Quran in Arabic.

Indeed, how can the following be done into any foreign language: (given in transliteration)

> Al-Rahmanu ála al-'Arshi-stawaa
>
> **Taha,** 5

Well, word for word it means:

> The All-Compassionate on the Throne is established

but then the Arabic verse does not consist in the 'meaning' of individual words, here abstracted for the purpose of 'convenient' rendering; it consists in a whole structure of which the meaning is only a part. There is music that springs from the heart of the words, from such 'mysteries' as are peculiar to our language--those shades of meaning which enrich the sound and are truly inscrutable.

A unique quality of the Quranic phrase is that it engenders a sense of trepidation in your heart the minute you hear it and even before you have pondered its meaning the mysterious effect of divine music seizes hold of you. The serenity of Quranic verse puts the mind in the right mood to discover the hidden meanings of the verse which reinforce the initial sense of trepidation, but mental (more precisely, 'intellectual') activity takes place at a later stage which may or may not happen. A

Quranic verse could reveal its secret to you or withhold it; you may or may not be endowed with the insight needed for the discovery of hidden meanings; but the original sense of trepidation is always there. This is hardly surprising insofar as the Author--God--is the Creator of language. The author could not have been Muhammad himself who trembled, just as any mortal would, when Archangel Gabriel conveyed to him God's verse: "Read! In the name of thy Lord who has created" He trembled, we know, and perspired heavily, unable to identify that commanding voice. Perplexed and almost in agony, he sought refuge in his wife Khadijah. He still trembled as he feared for his sanity. Khadijah had, we remember, kind words to say:

> "I swear by God! He will never let you down: you are charitable to your kith and kin, generous to the destitute, hospitable to your guests; you bravely bear life's burdens and vindicate the truth."

For two long years no verses were revealed. Muhammad was left alone in utter perplexity, pacing the vast solitudes of the Arabian desert, wondering about that mysterious voice. Had he been a professional writer, he could have written a whole book in the interval. But he was an honest 'listener', pure and simple; he listened to the words of revelation, just as you and I listen to them, and felt the transcendental music reverberate in his soul. He was captivated by the unique phonetic structure. When the voice was back, two years later, it said:

> O Thou enwrapped
> Arise and warn

After that verses were regularly revealed. Muhammad never pretended to be a miracle-worker. When his son Ibrahim died a

total eclipse of the sun occurred. People interpreted this as a miracle, believing that nature had shown sympathy with the Prophet, but he denied it categorically. "The Sun and the Moon", he said, "are two of God's signs: they are not eclipsed to mark the birth or death of an ordinary mortal". If Muhammad had been an impostor, he would have capitalized on the event and claimed that the eclipse occurred on account of his son's death, but he was truthful and honest throughout his life.

Revelation means that God revealed to Muhammad things he had not previously known:

> That is of the tidings of the Unseen, that we reveal to thee; for thou wast not with them, when they were casting quills which of them should have charge of Mary: thou wast not with them, when they were disputing
>
> **The House of Imran,** 44
>
> That is of the tidings of the Unseen that we reveal to Thee; thou didst not know it, neither thy people, before this; So be patient; the issue ultimate is to the god-fearing
>
> **Hood,** 49

God revealed to Muhammad some of the stories of the Torah and the Gospel while yet untranslated into Arabic. (The first Christian text ever to be done into Arabic was not available as yet: the manuscript at St. Petersberg's was not done until A.D. 1060). The Scriptures were Hebrew secrets--arcana confined to the Hebrews. The Quran therefore challenged the Jews to produce their Book and refer to it:

Say: 'Bring you the Torah now, and recite it if you are truthful'.

The House of Imran, 93

The Quran also corrects some of the details in certain Torah stories. According to the Torah, Joseph's brothers travelled on donkeys' backs, but the Quran has the more credible story that they used camels; more credible because the donkey is an urban animal, hardly capable of travelling great distances in the desert. Only camels could have taken Joseph's brothers from Palestine to Egypt. Didn't Jeremiah lament the 'lying pens of the scribes'?

Revelation gave Muhammad information which was equally unknown to the Torah scribes and scholars. Revelation gave him enigmatic openings to various Quran chapters **(Suras)** such as K.H.Y.A.S. and H.M. which Muhammad never claimed to be able to explain. Moreover, if Muhammad were the author of the Quran, he would have infused it with personal feelings and reflections. But the Quran, as we know, is completely devoid of these. It is totally unrelated to the personal life of the Prophet: indeed, many verses are revealed to him which run counter to his personal desires:

And hasten not with the Quran ere its revelation is accomplished unto thee; and say, 'O my Lord, increase me in knowledge.'

Taha, 114

The Quran is therefore a transcendental reality, completely unconnected with the soul to which it was revealed; and that soul can be no more than a medium, a transmitter of a truthful report. The Quran is revealed by God, the Almighty and Omniscient.

Chapter II

Free will and Predestination

Captivated by the perfection of the Quran's phonetic, structure, which is unique in Arabic and inimitable, I believe, in any other language, dead or alive, the reader becomes conscious of the divine source and his appetite is quickened. After the initial sense of trepidation, which elevates and purifies, he becomes eager to delve deep in the other inimitable Quranic structure, namely the semantic. The ideas that unfold are so rich and so profound that volumes upon volumes of interpretation may not do them justice. I shall therefore confine myself to a few of these ideas in the hope of presenting the Quranic view of some of man's eternal problems, primarily the question of freedom.

The question of man's freedom constitutes by far the commonest trap of the rationalists. They are invariably heard to ask:

- If I am predestined to act as I do, why should I be taken to account for it?
- If it is God's will that things should happen the way they do, why should I be held responsible?

It is indeed a problem. Prophet Muhammad advised his companions to avoid this kind of argument. He specifically advised: 'Whenever Fate is mentioned, desist from arguing.' He knew, of course, that the question of Fate belonged in a category of philosophic problems for which no ready solution was available in terms of the 'sciences' of his age. He knew that such an argument should plunge them into a philosophical

labyrinth wherein they would be lost; heart-held faith was therefore preferable to barren rationalistic arguments.

This advice is no longer applicable, however, as the study of philosophy is today available at most universities, and most people, even the young, can read philosophy without difficulty. The question becomes relevant, therefore, and requires an answer in philosophical and religious terms at once. And this is what the Quran provides.

If you consider the universe -- the earth, the sky, the stars and the planets -- you will realize that it is governed by a perfect order and obeys the laws of causality. Nothing that exists can disobey that perfectly established order. Armed with no more than pen and paper you could today make calculations and establish with the utmost precision the times of sunrise and sunset, because the sun moves (apparently, at any rate) according to a fixed law. Everything around you moves in fact according to fixed laws--except you yourself! You feel, don't you, that you can do what you like.

Man is the only creature who feels he could do what he likes, that he is free, that he could rebel against his circumstances and even against his own nature. He is often in conflict with the world around him, perpetually engaged in a fight whose outcome nobody could predict.

Freud once made the mistake of believing in 'psychological determinism', according to which the human will was thought to be apparently free but really restricted by the dictates of the instincts and the mechanism of motivation. He changed his mind later on, however, concluding that instincts were no more than obscure but unshaped motives which may be controlled at will; they could be repressed, released or sublimated. Accordingly, an instinct is today shown to be a human condition

controllable by the will, just as man uses his will in controlling physical conditions. The will is therefore a fact of the human spirit which is well above man's instincts.

Let us consider another example, namely the so-called class-determinisim of Marxism. According to the Marxists an individual's motives, emotions, desires and behaviour are all determined by his class. Every individual, they tell us, acts not as an individual human being but as a representative of a class--the aristocracy, the feudalists or the proletariat. Indeed, they deny the individual an independent soul; what he believes to be a soul is no more than a set of behavioural patterns drawn from his class. In other words the individual is merely a medium for the perpetual conflict between social forces.

This view accounts for the severe contradictions within Marxism. How can we in the light of this view explain Tolstoy's behaviour who, a feudalist, acted more like a poor peasant? An anarchist like Kropotkin provides another example. Even Marx himself, who belonged to the bourgeoisie, rebelled against his own class. On the other hand we may come across a farmer or a worker acting against the interests of his own class. The farmer may fail to combat pests on a cooperative farm, and the worker may omit to do maintenance work on a public bus. Such 'determinism' as postulated by class psychology is inaccurate and unscientific.

The truth is that the human spirit is unique; it differs from all forms of material existence in being able to 'get away' from the 'necessary', even the inevitable. Man's will is free to violate any compact. It is impossible to predict what will happen within man's inner self insofar as this is indeed free. Nothing could prevent a man from holding something **within himself**: man is the only creature who is really and truly the master of his own dreams.

This virgin, inner freedom is, however, soon thwarted by the material world as man comes into contact with it in practice. A desire remains free for as long as it is latent or confined to the inner self; once it seeks concrete expression it is obstructed by the body. Our body, in fact, confines us as though it were a plastic mould. We are besieged by physical needs: we are required to provide the body with food and drink in our struggle for survival, and so we join the 'rat race', losing part of our freedom. We lose only a part of our freedom, however, not all of it, as the price we must pay. How otherwise can our desires find an outlet? The body is thus a means of expressing our freedom inasmuch as it imposes restrictions on it. Other people's bodies may also be regarded as the means of attaining our freedom: we make use of the worker's products, the farmer's produce, the writer's thought--the fruit of other people's bodies and freedoms.

Society is in effect a huge instrument of realizing our freedom; it is placed at our service and has placed at our service its myriad amenities--posts, transport, electricity, water supply, industry and science. When a man takes a train to a distant city he actually uses a concrete means of freedom prepared by thousands of workers, engineers and inventors; and he has to relinquish a part of his freedom in return for this. He pays the price not only to society, however, but also to the world at large, even to the universe! The earth's gravity, air pressure, the oceans' water and the stars above, all besiege him and require him to achieve a degree of harmony with them. And harmony wins him his freedom.

Harmony enables him to ride the world though it were a horse! His knowledge about the movement of the wind enables him to put it to his service: he is now **free** to sail in the sea! His

knowledge of people helps him to live in harmony with them: he can serve their interests and his, winning them over really and truly, thus establishing his freedom on harmony.

Man is therefore subject to the forces of two worlds: the world of will within, and the material world without; the latter, we know, obeys immutable, restrictive laws. His only means of freedom of action is to gain knowledge of these laws and to learn how to use them by living in harmony with them--which is always possible. Freedom is a fact; it is not negated but rather affirmed by external and adverse material conditions. Indeed, freedom becomes significant only through conflict: without conflict it is meaningless.

Now ethical codes and social laws do not negate but regulate man's freedom, rather like traffic lights which guarantee freedom of passage for all. When you establish controls over your desires you actually gain your freedom, because thus you become the master of your fate not the slave of your instincts.

Options of gambling, drunkenness, drug addiction and sexual promiscuity are not freedoms at all; they are forms of suicide. They are against life and consequently against freedom. Any option against life is hardly an option at all; any option against the law of nature is the negation of option. When we swim, we can increase our freedom by going with the current, not against it--the current being the physical laws governing our existence.

Having said that we come to the eternal mystery of man's relation to God, and how man's freedom is related to the will of God which is absolute. The Quran has a few words to say on this which give us vital clues. But, because the Quran is not a book on philosophy, it gives no more than hints which are highly revealing and significant. The Quran states first that it was God's will that man be free, that man's freedom involve

no coercion on either side but rather a divine will. The Quran states clearly:

> And if thy Lord had willed, whoever is in the earth would have believed, all of them, all together. Wouldst thou then force the people to believe?
>
> **Jonah,** 99

Although he could have done it, God wouldn't force people to believe. He wanted man to be free, to opt for belief or disbelief--whichever way he wished:

> Say: 'The Truth is from your Lord;
> So, let whosoever will believe,
> and let whosoever will disbelieve.
>
> **The Cave,** 29

> No compulsion is there in religion.
> Rectitude has become clear from error.
>
> **The Cow,** 256

> If We had so willed, We could have given every soul its guidance.
>
> **Prostration,** 13

> As for Thamoud, We guided them, but they preferred blindness above guidance;
>
> **Distinguished,** 17

God leaves us alone, though we prefer blindness to guidance, and His will had thus established our freedom. God actually did

more: He gave us the choice whether to have any choice or not by offering us the 'Trust' (that is, freedom and responsibility) which we could have declined. Man accepted, while the mountains refused, to carry the 'Trust' because he was ignorant of himself and could hardly do himself justice:

> We offered the Trust to the heavens and
> the earth and the mountains, but they
> refused to carry it and were afraid of it;
> and man carried it.
> Surely he is sinful, very foolish.
>
> **The Confederates,** 72

Man was ignorant of what such a Trust entailed in terms of responsibility, choice and vanity; it entailed injustice on the part of the individual both to himself and to others. God knew of this great trial and tribulation to man, but He also knew that it would help him to be pure of heart:

> And when thy Lord said to the angels,
> 'I am setting in the earth a viceroy.'
> They said, 'what, wilt Thou set therein
> one who will do corruption there, and
> shed blood, while We proclaim Thy
> praise and call Thee Holy?' He said,
> 'Assuredly I know that you know not.'
>
> **The Cow,** 30

We do not know how God made this offer of freedom to man, that is, whether to be free or not. It could have happened at the beginning of creation (when Adam was created), or it may be a continuous process taking place at a certain level of prenatal existence. The question belongs in the 'Absolute Useen' and the Quran gives us no more than a glimpse.

At any rate, Man has accepted the Trust, that is, his freedom which entails responsibility. Only the free can be held responsible and may be called to account for their actions. The Quran states this in firm and categorical verses:

> Every soul shall be pledged for what it has earned.
>
> **Shrouded,** 38

> Every man shall be pledged for what he has earned
>
> **The Mount,** 21

> And every man--We have fastened to him his bird upon his neck
>
> **The Night Journey,** 13

> Say: 'You will not be questioned concerning our sins, neither shall we be questioned as to what you do.'
>
> **Sheba,** 25

> No soul laden bears the load of another.
>
> **The Night Journey,** 15

No one may carry the sins of another: each is judged solely by his own work. Freedom means that man's **conscience, intentions** and **inner self** constitute a sanctum, a holy of holies. No coercion of any kind may be exercised therein; God has pledged himself to keep it entirely free. You are absolutely free to 'take action in your inner self'; you can feel, think, or harbour any

intentions you like. God's intervention begins only when an inner wish develops into physical action. God then would enable man to do what he had already wished or chosen to do--which is only fair, insofar as it helps to maintain harmony between inner and outer life:

> As for him who gives and is godfearing
> and confirms the reward most fair, We
> shall surely ease him to the Easing. But
> as for him who is a miser, and claims
> self-sufficiency and denies the reward
> most fair, We shall surely ease him to
> the Hardship;
>
> **The Night,** 5–10

This is a definite promise by God to maintain harmony between action and intention: the good will be helped to do good, the bad will be left to their devils:

> And He knew what was in their hearts,
> so He sent down tranquillity upon them,
> and rewarded them with a nigh victory
>
> **Victory,** 18

Elsewhere God says:

> If God had known of any good in them
> He would have made them hear;
>
> **The Spoils,** 23
>
> When they swerved
> God caused their hearts to swerve
>
> **The Ranks,** 5

And because God has foreknowledge of everything, He speaks in the Quran of those

against whom has been realized the
  Word

Distinguished, 25

and

those unto whom already
the reward most fair has gone forth
  from Us

The Prophets, 101

Some of them God guided,
and some were justly disposed
  to error

The Bee, 36

but now My Word is realized--
"Assuredly I shall fill Gehenna
with jinn and men all together."

Prostration, 13

God had foreknowledge that Man would 'do corruption' in the earth, that he would shed blood, that he would 'do injustice unto himself', and that he would thus incur varying degrees of punishment: but foreknowledge is not predestination. On the contrary, this is the only way to be fair. It is like having two children, one intelligent and keen on learning, the other slow and uninterested; wouldn't you tend to help the first and leave the second alone? Indeed, if you acted differently, you would be forcing your children to do what is unsuited to them. Your foreknwledge is not predestination, is it? It is just what it says--foreknowledge. Judging by the character of your second son,

you **know** that he would turn away from books and neglect his studies. When he does so, it would not be as a result of any coercion on your part but because he is acting **in character**, of which you had foreknowledge. When he makes a mistake wouldn't he deserve to be punished? Only thus would he be able to understand himself, that is, by experience. He would come to 'learn' about himself what you had always known about him:

> Then a soul shall learn
> what it had done, before and after
>
> **The Splitting,** 5

This life is therefore more like a 'test field' and a trial of the real mettle of souls:

> He created death and life
> that He might try you
> which of you is fairest in works;
>
> **The Kingdom,** 2

To preclude any excuses for misdeeds on the Day of Reckoning, that is, to avert citing the influence of conventions, traditions, the environment or society as excuses for misdeeds, God says in the Quran:

> There is no fault in you if you make mistakes but only in what your hearts premeditate.
>
> **The Confederates,** 5

and, elsewhere:

> God will not take you to task for a slip in your oaths; but He will take you to task for what your hearts have earned.
>
> **The Cow,** 225

The heart is obviously the real touchstone of good works. Speaking of those who, having believed, turn away from religion, God specifies the 'painful chastisement' that awaits them but again excludes some:

> Excepting him who has been compelled
> and his heart is still tranquil with belief;
>
> **The Bee,** 106

The reference is obviously to those who may be forced to 'say' that they had turned away from belief while in their hearts they continue to believe firmly in God. It is what happens in a man's heart that counts, primarily, not outward action.

> Upon the day when the secrets are tried
>
> **The Night Star,** 9

By the 'secret' is meant the 'inner self' and intentions--that region in man's soul which is free from the influence of circumstances, society, conventions etc. It is the absolute point of departure and is free from all restraints. It is your very spirit, your individuality, which is as unique as your fingerprints. Your spirit partakes of God's own freedom inasmuch as it is a breath of the Lord:

> When I have shaped him and breathed
> My spirit in him, fall you down,
> bowing before him!
>
> **El-Hijr,** 29

It is because you have the Divine Essence breathed in you and are honoured by enjoying free will that you are accountable for your actions. God is therefore as fair as He is generous. And, consequently, man's spirit is often associated with God's power in highly significant verses:

and when thou threwest, it was not
thyself that threw, but God threw

The Spoils, 17

You achieve victory with your own as well as God's hand; at the moment of victory your hand is identified with God's, your will with His.

An objection may be raised: Could the inner self or the intention be also predestined? The answer is a categorical 'no', as the Quran itself explains:

In their hearts is a sickness
and God has increased their sickness

The Cow, 10

Even so God leads astray the prodigal
and the doubter

The Forgiver of Sins, 34

But those who are guided aright, them
He increases in guidance

Muhammad, 17

When they swerved
God causd their hearts to swerve;

The Ranks, 5

I shall turn from my signs those who
wax proud in the earth unjustly;

The Battlements, 146

You are free to feel, think or desire; the initiative in your inner self is entirely yours. God's intervention takes place at a later stage and accords with your intentions: He increases the

'sickness' of those who already have sickness in their hearts, but if you would be guided, God will certainly support your effort for rectitude.

God would never 'predestine' you to harbour evil intentions or a desire to do harm to people:

> Say, God does not command indecency;
> What, do you say concerning God such
> things as you know not?
>
> **The Battlements,** 28

The primal law of creation is for the spirit to be a holy of holies--a shrine secure from external influences. No one could force the spirit to harbour anything against man's will--not God, nor His prophets and saints.

It is the 'great mystery', the ultimate 'secret' of which only God has knowledge. A Prophet's tradition concerning his Companion Abu-Bakr refers to this 'secret':

> Abu-Bakr stands better than you in the eyes of God not on account of his prayer and fasting but because of a secret harboured in his heart.

The Quran says:

> Many of the People of the Book wish they might restore you as unbelievers, after you have believed, in the jealousy of their souls;
>
> **The Cow,** 109

God did not inspire them with jealousy: they are jealous of their own free will. There is a confirmation here of that region left

entirely free by God within man's being. In another verse God says to Satan:

> Over My servants thou shalt have no authority, except those that follow thee, being perverse;
>
> **El-Hijr**, 42

This means that the devil cannot have access to your heart unless you, being perverse, allow him; he cannot force his way through. Man's heart is protected by nature, that is, by God's will; but if man decides that his heart be open to the devil's temptations, it will be man's choice to be thus led to evil. What is in your heart is a sanctum which could never be violated; no power, however great, can force a man to change his feelings towards something or someone. You can force people to shout your name, but can you force them to love you? You can force your servant to do things for you, but can you tell how he feels about you? The Quran holds you to be free and to bear full responsibility for your actions, whatever the compelling physical circumstances around you.

On the Day of Reckoning we are not allowed therefore to blame someone else for our sins. We cannot say that we were 'forced' to disbelieve, or to 'swerve' from true religion insofar as we have within ourselves that 'free region', that sanctum, which no external powers can conquer. And insofar as our will is free, no circumstances, however adverse, may be invoked in justification of disbelief. Referring to such adverse circumstances, the Quran says:

> And those the angels take, while still they are wronging themselves--the

angels will say, 'In what circumstances were you?' They will say, 'We were abased in the earth.' The angels will say, 'But was not God's earth wide, so that you might have emigrated in it?'

Women, 97

No excuses!

Having to make a choice, a man chooses what is in his inner self.

Surely We guided him upon the way whether to be thankful or unthankful.

Man, 3

The word **whether** clearly implies choice.

By the soul and That which shaped it
and inspired it to lewdness and
godfearing!

The Sun, 7–8

This means that God has established both paths, the good and the bad, leaving the choice to man's soul. Hence the use of the conjunction 'and' rather than 'or', as both paths are there together and at the same time to ensure that man has a choice. The following verses confirm this reading:

Prosperous is he who purifies it, and failed has he who seduces it.

The Sun, 9–10

In other words, success and failure are the responsibility of the choosing self. Another verse further clarifies the point:

Have we not guided him on the two
highways?

The City, 10

That is, God has established us on the crossroads of two highways to allow us to choose one of them.

> Intention is free.
> The inner self is free to keep whatever secrets it wants.
> But action is at once free and predestined.

Each one of us enjoys a degree of freedom of action. Those advocating determinism will be hard put to it to explain the difference between the two conditions of health and disease: when healthy, the hand is free to move; when feverish, the hand shakes helplessly. Choice obtains in the case of health, necessity in the case of illness. If Necessity was the absolute rule, the two cases would not be distinguishable at all. Indeed, there would be no such cases in the first place.

Freedom of action is a fact; so is destiny.

The problem is to understand the nature of this duality, to see that the one does not negate the other, that Fate does not negate man's freedom, nor man's freedom Fate.

We merely infer this from verses characterized by great subtlety; it is given implicitly, rather than explicitly, so that people are not confused.

God says in His Book:

> If We will, We shall send down on them out of heaven a sign, so their necks will stay humbled to it
>
> **The Poets,** 4

He could if He would, but God does not want to force us into belief so that the freedom of choice, which lies at the centre of

our existence, may not be adversely affected. He wants us to be free, whether we believe or disbelieve.

It was not God who made Satan a fallen angel.

It was Satan who chose to be proud and vainglorious by refusing, unlike the rest of the angels, to serve Adam. He said:

> Said he, 'I am better than he; Thou createdst me of fire, and him Thou createdst of clay'.
>
> **Saad,** 76

Satan chose vanity, unfounded in knowledge or right. Consequently, God chose him to tempt people and made his fate to accord with his will.

Similarly, God knew of the purity of Muhammad's heart and so chose him to be His Prophet.

> But those who struggle in our cause, surely We shall guide them in our ways;
>
> **The Spider,** 69

It is for this reason, that is, to ensure our freedom of choice, that God 'hides' himself in the Gospel and 'hides' himself in the Quran: He does not want to show Himself so decisively that we would be **forced** to believe. He allows the Torah, the Gospel and the Quran to be books in which we may or may not believe. Of the Quran in particular He says:

> Thereby He leads
> Many astray, and thereby He guides
> Many;
>
> **The Cow,** 26

The verses of the Quran carry enough evidence, to be sure; but it is not the kind of evidence that leaves no room for reasoning

and consideration. God allows you always to make your own deductions and draw your own conclusions, because He would like you to exercise your **freedom.** And because you are not subjected to restrictive influences, your real intentions will emerge and your work will be judged fairly.

God wants you to be, in a sense, His viceroy--His little deputy--on earth; you would pass judgment on your and other people's affairs--as a kind of test or trial.

The following verse explains how Divine Will and individual freedom converge, that they could never be in opposition. The 'hypocrites' had said that they would--though they actually did not want to--fight alongside the believers:

> If they had desired to go forth, they would have made some preparation for it; but God was averse that they should be aroused, so He made them pause, and it was said to them, 'Tarry you with the tarriers'. Had they gone forth among you, they would only have increased you in trouble, and run to and fro in your midst, seeking to stir up sedition between you; and some of you would listen to them; and God knows the evildoers.
>
> **Repentance,** 46–47

As their real intention was not to fight, God made them stay behind. In other words, Divine will coincided with man's will. This correspondence between divine and human wills is stated more explicitly in another verse. God is addressing His prophet:

> O Prophet, say to the prisoners in your hands: 'If God knows of any good in

your hearts He will give you better than what He has taken from you: and He will forgive you;

The Spoils, 70

Divine will (fate) is always akin to the intention--which is the quintessence of choice. In the light of this we can understand why the following verses, apparently contradictory, mean the same thing in effect:

Say: the Truth is from your Lord, so let whosoever will believe, and let whosoever will disbelieve.

The Cave, 29

But you will not unless God wills;

Man, 30

The first verse speaks of man's free will, the second of Divine will or fate, and the apparent contradiction is resolved when we remember that God wants for man only what man wants for himself:

But whoso makes a breach with the Messenger after the guidance has become clear to him, and follows a way other than the believers' him we shall turn over to that he has turned to, and we shall roast him in Gehenna--
an evil homecoming!

Women, 115

God will not force a man who has opted for evil and persisted in his desire for wrong-doing to be righteous. On the contrary, God will choose for him what the individual has chosen for

himself; He will make it easier for him to proceed along his chosen path so that his intentions are fully realized. Having actually done evil, the individual will be subjected to chastisement:

> We shall turn him over to what he has
> turned to and we shall roast him in
> Gehenna an evil homecoming

Fate here coincides with choice; there is no contradiction, as the will of God is the will of his servant.

No duality!

> God changes not what is in a people
> until they change what is in themselves;
>
> **Thunder,** 11

The concurrence of both wills is only too obvious. There is the working of both at once--individual freedom and fate. Man takes action of his own free will, while God in fact wills it to happen; for both must concur: "Say: each cometh from God".

You will indeed; but then your capacity for choice is God's gift; it is a Divine will. Your freedom is Divine will; hence the verse:

> But you will not unless God wills;
>
> **Man,** 30

Far from being a paradox, therefore, this is a simple statement of fact.

> And God disclosed what you were
> hiding;
>
> **The Cow,** 72

God brings forth whatever is hidden in one's heart so that each one would have his own intentions materialized. Each would

bear responsibility for his actions insofar as it is based on free choice. A decisive verse settles the question once for all:

> And know that God stands between a man and his heart, and that to Him you shall be mustered.
>
> **The Spoils,** 24

This means that God leaves the heart quite free, so that each individual will have a free inner self: God only exercises his power **between** a man and his heart. In other words, God sometimes prevents man from wrong-doing even though a man wants it. God never intervenes at the level of thought, feeling or intention, but He may intervene at a later stage and then only at the level of action. As has been mentioned, the action encouraged and facilitated by God is normally of the same nature as the intention. But sometimes the heart is wayward; and God may desire to protect a good man from the vagaries of the heart; and He therefore intervenes to help his good servant.

> Remember in thy dream God showed them to thee as few; had he shown them as many, you would surely have been discouraged, and you would surely have disputed in your decision; but God saved you; He knoweth the secrets in your breasts.
>
> And remember when you met, He showed them as few in your eyes, and He made you appear as contemptible in their eyes, that God might accomplish a matter already enacted. And unto God are all matters referred.
>
> **The Spoils,** 43

This is an instance of unobtrusive divine intervention. God wants to urge Muslims to fight the battle at Badr even though they are outnumbered (they were only three hundred facing a thousand-strong, better equipped army). He wants the Muslims to fight of their own free will and so He reveals to the Prophet, in a vision, that his enemies are few and hardly invincible. On the battlefield God reinforces this feeling while encouraging the infidels to believe that the Muslims can easily be defeated. He thus makes both sides fight a battle the result of which He had previously determined.

A kind of preordination, no doubt; but then it accords with the free will of each party. And it is the will, deep down in the recesses of our inner selves, for which we are responsible.

Gleaming like secret fountains of light, these Quranic verses provide the key to the apparently insuperable problem of choice and preordination--a problem which man's philosophic approach has found a hard nut to crack.

Chapter III

The Story of Creation

The beginning, Creation. How did it happen? The birth of the earth, the Moon, the Sun, the stars--how did it all happen? How did the first man step on this earth? Where did he come from? All these are questions which have been handled under various disciplines--biology, anthropology, astronomy, organic chemistry, geology, evolution (now an independent science), genetics, anatomy--in volume upon volume of scientific material and with a variety of evidence and theories being advanced in support of one view or another. We cannot simply ignore all this as we read what the Quran has to say about Creation. Religion has never been isolated from life or opposed to science; for religion provides us with ultimate knowledge--facts that are certain as distinguished from the myriad possibilities and probabilities of science. Religion gives us the final word and, consequently, we cannot discuss it without really discussing everything else--without, that is, discussing the question from the scientific, religious, philosophical and political points of view.

I have actually dealt with the subject rather fully in two books, published in Arabic some time ago, **The Mystery of Death** and **The Mystery of life**. I cannot therefore repeat what I already said in them. I believe I may, however, sum up my central argument in a general way. Let me begin by outlining Darwin's vision of the evolution of life, a vision that has changed man's thinking about himself and the world.

In a voyage around the world aboard **The Beagle**, Darwin managed to marshal certain data about all living beings on land,

in the sea and on the seabed. He established the following observations:

- Living creatures continually change and adapt themselves to their environment.
- Man in the arctic zone is fat, just like whales, as though the extra layers of fat were meant to protect him from the cold. In equatorial zones man is lean and black, as though the dark colour was meant to protect him from the sun.
- Cave lizards which live in the dark have no use for physical vision or skin colour; they are consequently blind and uncoloured. Prarie lizards are, on the other hand, sharp-sighted and coloured.
- Animals' mouths vary according to function. There are mouths equipped with dagger-shaped teeth which cut and tear up the flesh (like a tiger's mouth); a mouth equipped with a beak, like a bird's; another with a hose for sucking blood, like a fly's; another with a needle like a mosquito's; and others with saws and grindstones like insects'.

Should we assume that all animals share a common origin which, however, developed in various ways to present us with such a wide variety of species dictated by the different environments on earth? Animals living on land developed legs, those in the sea had their legs developed into fins, while those who fly had their arms developed into wings? If such an assumption is correct, all animals must have similar physical structures. And this the lancet confirms. A snake, which has no legs, has been found to have atrophied limbs hidden within its skeleton. Birds which appear to have only one pair of limbs have been shown to have another pair developed into wings to suit the newly acquired function of flying. Those kinds of fish which today

live on land (amphibiously) have been proven, anatomically, to have lungs developed from ancient 'float bladders'. The four fins are oar-like appendages developed from the old limbs. Fingers and toes are always five--in man, apes, mice, lizards and even in bats, though they are atrophied here. The heart and blood circulation are the same in whales, mice, apes, man and bats: the same arteries are to be found in each species and the heart is the same with its four chambers. The nervous system, which consists of a brain and sinews etc, is the same in each. The muscular system and the skeleton are similar, with a few modifications necessitated by different functions. The same genitals, testicles, ovaries, uterus etc are to be found in every animal. Pregnancy in man lasts nine months, as it does in the primates and other mammals (whales, for instance); and all nurse their young for two years. .

Another discovery: human anatomy shows the tail vertebrae of the apes, though again atrophied and stuck together, as having no function to perform; the tail muscles have developed into a solid support for the pelvis. There are seven vertebrae in the human neck, the giraff's neck and the hedgehog's!

It was further discovered that an embryo evolves in phases in the uterus. At one stage it looks like a fish with gills; at another it develops a tail which gradually disappears; at a third it becomes completely hairy, but then the hair recedes leaving a limited hairy area on the head. It was the embryo that told the whole story--the story of the beginning, and the stages of evolution.

Tampering with man's ear, the lancet has made yet another discovery: behind the ear are the ear muscles that had moved the ears of man in the past, in much the same way as donkey's ears move today. The human ear muscles are again atrophied

because our ears have taken their present shape and position and so deprived their muscles of all functions.

Fossils have given us human skulls close in shape to those of apes, in Transval, Peking, Java and Neanderthal. Some of these skulls were discovered in caves where the relics of charred wood in primitive stoves show that those early men had known fire and used it millions of years ago.

With this evidence in hand, all Darwin had to do was to sit down and formulate his theory of the origin of the species. Indeed, the theory seemed to require hardly any 'formulation'. It was there: all species evolved from the same origin; the root produced a tree with various branches, and genus and species varied according to varying environments.

Now Darwin does not say that man evolved from the ape, or that the human race evolved from chimpanzees or monkeys. This is merely a joke popularized by the press and spread about as a humorous caricature of Darwinism.

As formulated by Darwin, the theory does not say that any of the existing species evolved from any other species, however anatomically similar, but that each is an independent branch of the tree of life. No branch sprouted from another (nor is the human branch a variety of the ape branch) but each emerged independently from the parent tree and both can be traced back to the same source, namely the initial living cell. It is the cell that constitutes the nucleus of every living organism, each varying according to various environments. No species, let us repeat, evolved from another, but each is the apex of its particular genus and is independent enough in constitution to be incapable of producing another branch, another species.

Darwin thoroughly examined evolution as a natural phenomenon. What he says about adaptation between a given creature and its environment explains nothing beyond congenital and

functional differences between creatures; it cannot explain their evolution from the low to the high. As an explanation had to be found, Darwin ventured a new idea, namely that evolution was due to purely 'internal' reasons, that is to say, without a guiding hand from outside. The struggle for survival was the sieve through which the fittest passed. Breeding and inter-breeding produced different combinations with varying degrees of fitness. A 'new combination' whose feet were equipped with flaps proved fitter to life in water and therefore survived at sea: all other water 'beings' who lacked flaps could not. 'Survival for the fittest' came to be a dictum too attractive to resist; and the concept of evolution was, as a natural corollary, solely based on the idea of physical, biological forces. In the light of this, living beings underwent a forced or inevitable process of evolution which, however, appeared spontaneous enough.

In the following years the 'theory' was tested and re-tested at the largest scale possible. A number of its essential doctrines survived, but many others were rejected. That all species had evolved from a single parent source but were differentiated later on under the influence of the environment appeared a plausible conclusion. It was likely to be correct in view of the evidence available: family ties existed between different creatures and they all seem to be related anatomically to one another. But the assumption that such evolution had taken place by force of purely biological necessity, that is, without a guiding hand, was no longer convincing.

Indeed, why should an animal like the horse evolve from the ass when the latter is more sturdy and robust? What material forces could prompt the evolution of the gazelle out of the antelope when the former is hardly as tough or strong as the latter? Consider the delicate, colourful butterflies which are

slower and more fragile than the humming tough-looking wasp; or the pigeons, palm-doves, peacocks and budgerigars which are more delicate than hawks, kites and vultures. The evolution of these species cannot be explained in terms of 'survival for the fittest' but rather in terms of 'survival for the most beautiful'.

'But **most beautiful** according to whom?' a sly critic will ask, 'surely beauty is in the eye of the beholder and beauty in the animal kingdom is determined by the laws of procreation? A female bird is attracted to the more colourful bird for the purpose of reproduction; "natural selection" is at work here too, therefore, and the determining factors are purely material and biological!'

This view is, however, most untenable and can be easily refuted. For why should a female choose a more beautiful male? A spotted coloured wing is not fitter for flying than a plain one; and biological interests are hardly at stake here. Rather we have high aesthetic values which outweigh all other forces. Here is the mind of the creative artist turning out beautiful creatures. We see his touch in tree leaves, the colours of flowers, the wings of butterflies and peacock feathers.

We wonder at some desert plants which have winged seeds that fly for miles over arid land in search of water. We wonder at mosquito eggs which are provided with airbags to help them stay afloat. This cannot be explained except in terms of the Universal Mind: the Greater Mind that thinks for His creatures. For neither the desert plant nor the mosquito is possessed of a mind: the plant cannot supply its seeds with wings, the mosquito cannot supply its eggs with airbags. These are natural phenomena which cannot be explained in terms of Darwin's theory, but only in terms of the Universal Mind that plans and creates all beings.

To illustrate this point, let us take a hypothetical example. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that our vision is so flawed that our eyes can only see the machine but not the maker of machines. We may, then, see the hand-cart, the horse-cart, the hackney, the motorcar, the steam locomotive, the diesel-fuelled engine and the electric train but NOT man. We should say that these things evolved from one. another, by stages. We should try to prove our point with reference to their anatomical similarities. They are all made of wood, iron, and leather, and their 'bodies' are drawn on wheels. Indeed, anatomy--a respected science--tells us that these bodies share the same components and move in the same manner, notwithstanding their different fuels--steam, petrol or diesel.

Now because we cannot see the maker we should assume that they have come to acquire their different shapes as a result of evolution, impelled by internal factors, as a result of a long struggle for survival in various environments and having passed through the 'survival for the fittest' sieve. We shall deny the existence of the outside factor because we cannot see 'him' and because we can see that they are all motored by an internal engine.

The mistake that Darwin made in formulating his evolutionary theory was to claim that evolutionary factors were purely internal. To put it differently, he made the mistake of denying the guiding hand of God simply because he could not see it. We thus have a theory which reveals family ties among living beings but does not explain how evolution takes place.

As to what science tells us about the beginning of life, we have a consensus of opinion that life started in water, perhaps in swamps where matter fermented, so that by a myriad processes of analysis and synthesis (controlled by mysterious forces) the

very elementary substance of all living things--protoplasm--came into being. Nobody knows exactly how this happened but, at a wild guess, we could attribute it to a combination of water and earth.

Regarding the beginning of the universe--the stars, planets and interstellar bodies--astronomers are in agreement that it had its origins in gas clouds and nebulae of particles of dust. The condensation of such clouds was caused, it is believed, by the force of gravity and the result was a kind of atomic structure where you have a nucleus in the middle (the Sun) and lesser and dimmer bodies orbiting it (the planets). Each solar system has this typical structure and in each galaxy you may have hundreds, even thousands of such systems.

This is how much science has contributed to our knowledge of the story of creation. What did the Quran say about this fourteen centuries ago? What did the Prophet say, when neither he nor his people had heard of biology, geology, organic chemistry, genetics, anatomy or anthropolgy?

* * *

The Quran has its distinctive style. When it deals with a scientific question it does not present it in terms of equations, as a mathematician would, or in terms of its anatomical details, as a biologist might, but it uses oblique terms, symbols, figures, metaphors, swift-shifting suggestions and expressions which shine like lightning in our minds. It puts in a word here, and another there, which may be impossible to interpret immediately. God knows, however, that a time will come when man will understand:

> We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that it is the truth.
>
> **Distinguished,** 53

About the Quran God says:

> None knows its interpretation save only God
>
> **The House of Imran,** 7

> Then Ours is to explain it
>
> **The Resurrection, 19**

which means that God will explain it to us in the fullness of time. Has that time arrived as yet? Let us try at any rate to find out what the Quran has to say about the story of creation. Of God, in the very beginning, it says:

> And He turned to the heaven when it was smoke
>
> **Distinguished,** 11

So in the beginning something like smoke had existed and from this the universe was created.

> He created the heavens and the earth in truth globing the night unto the day, globing the day unto the night.
>
> **The Companies,** 5

A verse impossible to understand until we have assumed the existence of a spherical earth, so that night and day must look like hemispheres moving into one another as a result of the continuous revolution of that globe. Indeed, the use of that verb 'globe' transitively in this context is quite unusual; we are forced to resort to that line of interpretation.

> And the moon--we have preordained its stations, till it came to be like an aged palm-bough
>
> **Ya Seen,** 39

The aged palm-bough is dry and lifeless--an apt simile for the moon that lacks water and vegetation and is quite lifeless.

> It behoves not the sun to overtake the moon, neither does the night outstrip the day, each swimming in an orbit.
>
> **Ya Seen,** 40

Indeed, the Quran actually refers to the orbits in the following 'neat description':

> By heaven with its tracks
>
> **The Scatterers,** 7

It also says that the shape of the earth is like an egg:

> and the earth--after that He 'ovalled' it
>
> **The Pluckers,** 30

--a strange word, but then, to stretch a point of grammar, 'oval' is used as a verb to imply that the earth is not a perfect sphere but is closer in shape to an 'ovum', which is consistent with the most recent astronomical findings.

The Quran refers to a recently discovered scientific fact, namely that behind apparent stillness there is movement within, even in the substance of apparently dead matter:

> Thou seest the mountains, thinking them solid, whilst they move like the clouds
>
> **Ants,** 88

The comparison with clouds is particularly significant: it suggests loose atomic structure, which is astually correct; 'solidity' is a mere illusion and each seemingly solid object consists of atoms in a state of motion; indeed, the entire planet earth is in a state of perpetual motion.

Old Quranic exegetes believe that this verse refers to what happens on the Day of Resurrection; but they are wrong. The Day of Resurrection is a day of certainty: there will be no room for 'thinking', no room for doubt. What happens to the mountains on that day is stated elsewhere in the Quran:

> They will question thee concerning the mountains. Say: My Lord will scatter them as ashes;
>
> **Ta Ha,** 105

Such is the Day of Resurrection: there will be no chance of 'thinking' what the mountains are like because they have been scattered to ashes. The former verse must therefore refer to the mountains in this world.

The Quran also tells us what happens to rain water:

> Hast thou not seen how God has sent down out of heaven water and threaded it as springs in the earth?
>
> **The Companies,** 21

This expalins the cycle of ground water: it comes down first from the 'sky', runs on the surface of the earth, goes underground into natural reservoirs then, gushing out in fountains and springs, goes back to the earth's surface. A direct reference to life occurs elsewhere:

> Of water we fashioned every living thing
>
> **The Prophets,** 30

> God has created every animal of water
>
> **Light,** 45

> What, disbelievest thou in Him who created thee of dust?
>
> **The Cave,** 37

And when thy Lord said to the angels 'See, I am creating a mortal of a clay of mud moulded

El-Hijr, 28

The 'mud moulded' refers to an organic process of fermentation, so the Quran says first that life is created out of water, then that it is created of dust, then of clay, that is, of a mixture of dust and water in a state of fermentation. It is precisely what science has come to tell us fourteen hundred years later. Elsewhere the Quran gives more details of the creation of man:

We created you, then We shaped you, then We said to the angels: 'Bow yourselves to Adam'; so they bowed themselves, except Satan--he was not of those that bowed themselves.

The Battlements, 11

The verse establishes the fact that man was created in stages--the operative word being 'then', which refers to a period of time elapsing between the first creation and the final shape given to man. Time in the Quran is not measured by the worldly divisions of days and weeks:

and surely a day
with thy Lord is as a thousand years of your counting

The Pilgrimage, 47

To Him the angels and the Spirit mount up in a day whereof the measure is fifty thousand years

The Stairways, 4

Such is the measure of God's days: they are more like whole eras or ages by our reckoning. So when God says 'We created you', 'then We shaped you', with the culmination occurring in Adam's creation '**then** we said to the angels bow yourselves to Adam', the implication must be that Adam was the result of a lengthy process of creation, shaping up, and perfecting, which might have taken millions of earthly years or a few of God's days:

> What ails you, that you look not for majesty in God when He has created you by stages?
>
> **Noah,** 13–14

-- an explicit statement that man was created in stages. Consider the following:

> Wasn't there a period of time when man was a thing insignificant?
>
> **Man,** 1

> Our Lord is He who created everything then guided the creation
>
> **Ta Ha,** 50

This means that God guided the process of creation until it reached its apex in Adam.

> No creature is there crawling on the earth, no bird flying with its wings but they are nations like unto yourselves.
>
> **Cattle,** 38

> And God caused you to grow out of the earth
>
> **Noah,** 17

The first verse establishes close links between the human race and the other 'nations' of the animal kingdom; the second extends the relationship to cover all living beings--men, animals and plants.

> We have created man
> of a breed from clay
>
> **The Believers,** 12

Now this is a direct statement. It explicitly says that man was not created in the beginning out of clay but rather out of a certain breed developed from clay. There is therefore an intermediate stage between clay and man--a stage of various successive breeds culminating in the superior breed of mankind.

Of the formation of the human foetus the Quran tells us that bones are created before the muscles:

> then we created of the tissue bones then
> we garmented the bones in flesh;
>
> **The Believers,** 14

Embryology tells us that the backbone is created before the formation of the muscles. The Quran says:

> He creates you in your mothers' wombs
> creation after creation in threefold
> shadows
>
> **The Companies,** 6

Creation in the uterus is done in stages--creation after creation. The threefold shadows are the darkness of the abdomen, the darkness of the uterus and, lastly, the darkness of the amniotic membrane, that is, we have a chamber within a chamber until we reach the foetus. These are anatomical facts. The threefold shadows could alternatively be the three membranes of the foetus--another anatomical fact.

> and that He himself created the two
> kinds male and female of a sperm-drop,
> when it was cast forth.
>
> **The Star**, 45–6

We know now that it is the sperm not the ovum that determines the sex of the foetus; it is the sperm that has the sex determination factor.

How did the Quran arrive at these conclusions which are in complete accord with the conclusions of modern science? A coincidence? Granting that one is a coincidence, can we believe that all others are also 'coincidences'?

How can the mind of an unlettered prophet arrive at the answers for so many questions which were completely unknown in his age but which have been proved correct more than thirteen hundred years after his death? To accept the Western atheist explanation that the words uttered by Muhammad represent the activity of an inner mind to which was revealed the ultimate truth is to admit politely and scientifically the existence of revelation. Indeed, the ultimate and absolute truth cannot be but God; and to be able to hold communion with Him is to be divinely inspired.

The story does not end here, however, as the Quran proceeds to tell us more than science does. The Quran tells us what happened in the Unseen--all that had happened in the Higher Assembly in the kingdom of God. We are told that when Adam was created God put him in the Garden, that is, the Garden of Paradise, wherein he was allowed to eat the fruits of all trees except one. We are told how God made the angels to bow themselves down to Adam. The angels did

> except Satan; he was of the jinn and
> disobeyed his Lord's command
>
> **The Cave,** 50

In disobeying the Divine Command, Satan had this to say:

I am better than he; Thou createdst me
of fire, and him Thou createdst of clay

Saad, 70

He could not fathom God's purpose in honouring a creature of clay. God knew, however, that Adam would undergo great suffering as a result of being thus created--of both clay and spirit. Man would be torn apart by the conflict between the low desires of his body and the higher desires of his soul.

We created man in trouble

The City, 4

The trouble meant is nothing more than the conflict, inherent in every human being between the two sides of his nature, which is designed to earn him a higher position than that of both the jinn and the angels. Hence the symbolic significance of God's command to the angels to bow down to Adam. Proud and exultant and conscious of the superior substance of which he was created before Adam, Satan would not bow down to the new creation:

and the jinn created We before
of fire pure

El-Hijr, 27

'Fire pure' means either intensely burning or pure fire. Now Satan had incurred God's wrath, he had to be deprived of the bliss of being close to God. Rather than repent and redeem his sin, Satan completely despaired of forgiveness. This was his second sin. He therefore swore vengeance, pitting his wits against Adam's 'humanity', and vowing to do him harm insofar as Adam, Satan thought, was the reason for his removal from

Heaven. And this was his third sin. The devil had therefore tried to redeem a sin by committing another and consequently continued to sink lower and lower still.

Satan then tempted Adam to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. He whispered to him that it was the tree of immortality, when it was in fact the tree of mortality--of death.

> And Adam disobeyed his Lord, and so
> he erred.
>
> **Ta Ha,** 121

God granted Adam freedom by breathing His spirit into him. He gave him the choice whether to be governed by His immutable laws, just like the stars in their orbits, or to have freedom and responsibility by carrying the Trust:

> We offered the Trust to the heavens and
> the earth and the mountains, but they
> refused to carry it and were afraid of it;
> and man carried it. Surely he is sinful,
> very foolish.
>
> **The Confederates,** 72

Man did not realize the risks involved in carrying that Trust; he accepted it foolishly beacuse it implied freedom. But God knew what it entailed, that man could only hope to avert these risks by obeying God and avoiding the forbidden tree. Only thus could he be assured of the Garden--the Paradise of obedience and submission to the Law of God.

Man had, however, chosen to be free and responsible; tempted by Satan, he disobeyed God and ate the forbidden tree. He was now accountable for his actions and stood to deserve punishment. His punishment consisted in being deprived of Paradise and in falling down to the world of toil and labour.

The difference between Adam's sin and Satan's was that Adam went back to God, repenting, hopeful of His forgiveness, while Satan persisted in disobedience and despaired of God's mercy.

> Thereafter Adam received certain words from his Lord, and He turned towards him;
>
> **The Cow,** 37

God granted him mercy and promised to give guidance to his seed. He established man on earth wherein he would rule by power of will and reason as God's viceroy:

> And when thy Lord said to the angels, 'I am setting in the earth a viceroy.' They said, 'what, wilt Thou set therein one who will do corruption there, and shed blood, while we proclaim Thy praise and call Thee Holy?
>
> **The Cow,** 30

The angels said this because they had seen that Adam was created in stages from animal ancestors that had shed one another's blood and fought each other perpetually. Their knowledge must come from past experience: only God is capable of foreknowledge. Their objection was, as it were, overruled, and God said:

> He said, 'Assuredly I know that you know not'
>
> **The Cow,** 30

Man has earned a higher position than the angels, God knew, owing to the peculiar circumstances of his 'rise' and the conflict

ingrained in his nature between clay and spirit. He had acquired, over a long period of time, certain abilities which qualified him to be God's viceroy on the earth--a fact which God reveals now to the angels:

> And He taught Adam the names, all of them; then He presented them unto the angels and said, 'Now tell Me the names of these, if you speak truly.' They said, 'Glory be to Thee! We know not save what Thou hast taught us. Surely Thou art the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.'
> He said, 'Adam, tell them their names.' And when he told them their names He said, 'Did I not tell you I know the Unseen things of the heavens and earth'?
>
> **The Cow,** 31–33

There was he! Earthly Adam, possessed of qualities higher than those of the angels. This implies that God had made Adam his first prophet on earth; the fact that he was taught the names, 'all of them', means that he now received divine inspiration.

Another significant fact revealed by this verse is that the human mind is only qualified to learn the names of things, not their essences. Man's capacity for learning is restricted, as the mind can only grasp the outer limits, quantities and relations--never the essences--of things, as modern philosophers have shown over and over again.

God is referred to in the Quran as **Rabb** which means 'master' (cf.Heb. Rabbi = my master)--a teacher, a shepherd, a guide, a kind and merciful **Lord** who takes care of His creatures and provides them with means of livelihhod.

God promised Adam that He would appoint prophets to guide Adam's seed:

> Yet there shall come to you guidance from Me, and whosoever follows my guidance, no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.
>
> **The Cow,** 38

The meaning of 'following God's guidance' is explained by the Quran. Man can be guided to understand his mistake and may, therefore, strive to regain the Paradise lost by his father--the Paradise of obedience and submission to God's laws. This is the return to God to which the Quran frequently refers. Man should realize that he owns nothing except his 'inner self' or conscience (the sanctum or holy of holies which God leaves free) and that he should submit it to God and God's laws of his own free will. Only thus could he prove better than the world of inanimate objects which submit to God's laws forcibly--from the pebble on the roadside to the stars in their orbits. Man submits willingly and out of love for the dear God who made us all. In doing this, however, man should understand that God's will must be done whether he likes it or not, and that God alone controls everything, that He alone can guide him because of His knowledge and power.

There are other abstruse verses in the Quran which imply that we, Adam's seed, had a previous life to this one on earth:

> And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify concerning themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?'

They said, 'Yes, we testify'--lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'As for us, we were heedless of this,' or lest you say, 'Our fathers were idolaters aforetimes, and we were seed after them. What, wilt Thou then destroy us for the deeds of the vain-doers?'
So We distinguished the signs; and haply they will return.

The Battlements, 172–4

It is a strange incident that God relates in this verse. The implication is that we had existed in God's world before we came down into our mothers' wombs (perhaps in the world of ideas or the Divine Kingdom, and possibly as spirits--no one knows). The verse further implies that God made us testify to His Godhead and took compact with us to that testimony so that we would not relapse into infidelity claiming to have been victims of our fathers' ignorance. We come across more references to this 'compact' in equally abstruse verses:

And when God took compact with the Prophets: 'That I have given you the Book and Wisdom; then there shall come to you a Messenger confirming what he is with you-- you shall believe in him and you shall help him; do you agree?' He said. 'And do you take My pact on that condition?' They said, 'We do agree.'
God said, 'Bear witness so, and I shall be with you among the witnesses.'

The House of Imran, 81

Here are the Prophets assembled for God's compact, namely to support one another. How did it happen? Where? When?

Such verses as these are highly significant insofar as they reveal mysteries by oblique expression. We had a spiritual, prenatal existence somewhere with God; we had existed before birth and will continue to exist after death.

Among God's names are: 'the Creator', 'the Maker', 'the Shaper'. The Creator is He who creates us as spirits; the Maker is He who determines (allows) our existence--as a king makes someone a knight; the Shaper is He who shapes our material moulds in our mothers' wombs. A tradition of Prophet Muhammad refers to such prenatal existence: 'I was a Prophet when Adam was still unshaped clay'. God tells Muhammad in the Quran:

> Say: My prayer, my ritual sacrifice, my living, my dying--all belongs to God, the Lord of all Being. No associate has He. Even so I have been commanded, and I am the first of all muslims.
>
> **Cattle,** 162–3

This implies that Muhammad had existed before all prophets, inasmuch as the Quran regards all prophets as muslims. The more relevant implication for us is that man's spirit had existed prenatally; it had lived with God before coming down to the womb.

* * *

Going back to that 'forbidden tree', we should enquire whether it is a real or a metaphoric one. A good deal of controversy has arisen over this. Some exegetes believe the tree

to be a symbol of knowledge but then it is most unlikely that God had forbidden man to 'eat of the tree of knowledge'. I find this explanation incompatible with God's command to man to acquire knowledge:

> Say, 'O my Lord, increase me in knowledge.'
>
> **Ta Ha,** 114
>
> Say, 'Journey in the land and behold how He originated creation.
>
> **The Spider,** 20

Others take it literally, and go so far as to specity it as a wheat plant. They explain that when Adam ate the fruit he wanted to have a bowel motion and became conscious of his genitals: 'their shameful parts revealed to them, they took to stitching upon themselves leaves of the Garden' (**Ta Ha,** 121). Personally I take the tree to be symbolic of sex and death which are ever associated in the story of biology. It was when living beings began to adopt copulation as a means of reproduction that death first came into the world: living beings did not copulate before that but simply renewed themselves by division.

Copulation was the forbidden tree which made life mortal. Adam's marriage to Eve had been originally one between immortals in Paradise and they naturally had no use for copulation. Satan knew, however, that the 'tree of breeding' meant the introduction of death and expulsion from the Garden of Immortals. He therefore lied to Adam. He tempted the couple to copulate by whispering to them that it was the tree of immortality.

As evidence of this view, let me refer the reader to the verse, cited above, where the Quran tells us that Adam and Eve felt

ashamed and consequently covered their 'shameful' parts with tree leaves. Surely no shame could be associated with the genitals unless after the experience of sex. Children are never 'ashamed' of their genitals while adults hesitate even to mention them. The address to them after the act is in the plural, not the dual--two distinct cases in Arabic grammar:

> Said He, 'Get ye all down, each of you
> an enemy to each
>
> **The Battlements,** 24

While the address before the sin was in the dual:

> Both of you eat of where you will but
> neither should come nigh this tree,
>
> **The Battlements,** 19

This means that eating the 'fruit of the tree' led to reproduction. The pleasure of sex is to this day associated with profanity and animal desires; it is sex, rather than food, that is associated with temptation and the fall. It has been suggested that circumcision was the penance self-imposed by Adam, following the sin, an act of pseudo-castration, in disgust at what he had done. Hence its present status as a religious tradition.

On the other hand, the tree may indeed be an actual tree, the eating of which releasing the body's hormones and arousing sexual desires and leading to Adam and Eve making love. This interpretation has the advantage of combining literal with figurative meanings. In matters like these, no absolute certainty may be attained; the truth is known only to God and the story of creation remains a great mystery. Still, I believe it is our duty to attempt to interpret such abstruse verses as these, insofar as we are commanded by God to make the attempt:

Say, journey in the land, then behold how He originated creation.

The Spider, 20

What, do they not consider how the camel was created?

The Enveloper, 17

What, do they not ponder the Quran? Or is it that there are locks upon their hearts?

Muhammad, 23

Indeed, it is our duty, our responsibility, to interpret the Quran, making use of all the information made available to us by modern science; we must understand how it all began. Those who object to our evolutionary interpretation will inevitably ask: what can the 'fall' mean--man's banishment from the Garden and the angels' bowing themselves down to Adam? Well, 'to fall' (to go down, or get down) occurs in the Quran in the sense of moving from one place to another. It need not imply leaving the earth altogether. Thus God addresses the children of Israel:

Get ye down to any town and ye shall find what ye want

The Cow, 61

The 'Garden' occurs elsewhere in the Quran to mean an orchard or an ordinary earthly garden:

For Sheba also there was a sign in their dwelling place--two gardens, one on the right and one on the left;

Sheba, 15

And on the earth are tracts neighbouring
each to each and gardens of vines,

Thunder, 4

The fall must therefore be a moral fall--a falling from Grace, from a condition of bliss (where Adam had been honoured by God) to a condition of misery (after Adam had disobeyed God and eaten the forbidden tree). The moral fall must have taken physical shape in Adam's expulsion from the easy life--perhaps in fertile lands and 'bounteous' orchards--to the hard livelihood he now had to eke out--in arid or barren land, perhaps. He had been down here on earth all the while, of course, but never fell down from any physical heaven.

The angels bowing themselves down to Adam must have taken place down here on earth as well. The act of bowing could be symbolic of the angels being placed in Adam's service, by God's command--as He was to put the jinn in prophet Solomon's service. Or it could be that God wanted to reveal some of the divine secrets to Adam, just as He revealed to Muhammad some divine mysteries on his night journey to Jerusalem and his ascension to Heaven. These are miracles reserved by God for His prophets and, as such, they reveal the high position God had placed Adam in. God had revealed all these things to Adam who never left the earth.

It is the earth rather than Heaven that is our 'scene'. God created Adam, shaped him out of the finest branch of the tree of life, planted him in the earth ('grown out of the earth's clay') and guided him up the scale of various breeds to the chosen apex--the present shape of man. The following verses support this view:

Out of the earth We created you, and
We shall restore you into it, and bring
you forth from it a second time.

Ta Ha, 55

> And God causes you to grow out of the earth then He shall return you into it, and bring you forth.
>
> **Noah,** 17–18

> Said He, 'Therein you shall live, and therein you shall die, and from there you shall be brought forth.'
>
> **The Battlements,** 25

It is the earth; we have never been away from it. The fall may be a falling down from one place on the earth to another.

In another chapter of the Quran **(Prostration)** we can infer the evolutionary idea from the way verses 7, 8 and 9 are made to suggest a sequence:

> He originated the creation of man out of clay then He fashioned his progeny of an extraction of mean water, then He shaped him, and breathed His spirit in him. And He appointed for you hearing, and sight, and heart; little thanks you show.

In the beginning was the clay; then a progeny of mean water (or water despised, that is, semen); then the fashioning, the shaping up and evolution across these progenies. Finally there was the breathing in of the spirit--the mind, the inner self or conscience, freedom--into the acme of these progenies, man. Man must have developed further to acquire the faculties of hearing, sight and feeling--the present highly developed man.

God mentions clay in the beginning, followed by the fashioning and the 'in-breathing'. Such a sequence must mean that

Adam was not created at once out of clay but in stages; an interpretation based on the idea of evolution is therefore implied:

> God created you of dust then of a sperm drop then He made you pairs.
>
> **Fatir,** 11

> And that He himself created the two kinds, male and female of a sperm drop, when it was cast forth;
>
> **The Star,** 45–6

The idea of falling down from heaven is refuted by the following verse:

> It is He who produced you from the earth and has given you to live therein:
>
> **Hood,** 61

Therein refers to the earth from which we are produced, which means that Adam came into being on earth, that the earth was subsequently given Adam to populate with his progeny. It is obvious that man's fall is purely moral--a fall from grace rather than a physical fall from Heaven:

> It is He who sent down out of heaven water, and thereby We have brought forth the shoot of every plant, and then We have brought forth the green leaf of it, bringing forth from it close-compounded grain.
>
> **Cattle,** 99

Could we infer from this verse that one breed came out of another rather than the independent creation of each?

Following the recent space probes, particularly man's landing on the Moon, certain theories have been advanced about the origin of man. One says that man landed on the earth in a spacecraft in ancient times, that there is no link between man and the animal kingdom on earth for all their obvious similarities. According to that theory man came in the beginning from another planet.

This is, of course, pure hypothesis and surmise, a fiction akin to the fantasies of Jules Vernes and H.G. Welles. There is no basis of fact for it.

The controversy over the story of creation is interminable.

Now, to sum up, the Quran neither supports nor denies the Theory of Evolution: Quranic verses are capable of more than one interpretation and the subject is therefore a mystery which cannot be decided one way or the other. Indeed, science itself has not reached a final conclusion on this question.

* * *

It is in the context of the story of creation that God tells us about the seven heavens:

> It is God who created seven heavens,
> and of the earth their like.
>
> **Divorce,** 12
>
> Who created seven heavens one upon
> another
>
> **The Kingdom,** 3
>
> And We created above you seven ways
>
> **The Believers,** 17

And We have built above you seven strong ones

The Tiding, 12

The question of the 'seven heavens' is still a mystery which modern science has failed to unravel. But the figure **seven** itself gives one to think: why should light consist of seven colours--the well-known spectrum bands modern science has established? We know now that this scale of wavelengths, from red to violet, is repeated both in the infra-red and ultra-violet areas. Similarly the musical scale is composed of seven notes which are again repeated. Geneologists tell us that a foetus becomes a fully grown baby in the seventh month of pregnancy: there is a risk of death if delivery occurs before that. From time immemorial man has grouped the days into units of seven and the week has been the established unit of measuring time. Without prior consultation or agreement, men of all colours and races and religions have accepted this. Why? How?

It has recently been discovered that the seven colours of sunlight (the spectrum) are caused by the transfer of the electron from one orbit to the next around the nucleus of the hydrogen atom. They are seven orbits. Every time the electron jumps from one orbit to the next an electric charge is released--which accounts for a corresponding colour of the spectrum.

These 'jumps' occur in the body of the Sun which consists of hydrogen. The tremendous heat (millions of degrees centigrade) forces the electrons to leave their atoms and radiate the 'white' light of the Sun. The electron therefore moves up the scale of seven orbits which are similar to the seven heavens. To move from one orbit to the next the electron must break one of the energy 'bands' attaching it to the nucleus; and the energy thus released takes the form of a particular colour of the spectrum.

When the round of spectrum colours is completed, the electron finally leaves the atom.

It is as though the atom is a microcosm--a miniature model of the universe with its seven heavens! Does this mean that one day we shall discover that there is a seven-grade scale for every form of existence? Perhaps we shall discover a seven-grade pattern being repeated from top to bottom? The Quran often refers to the figure '7'--Gehenna has seven doors; there are seven heavens and seven earths; we hear of Pharaoh's seven lean years and seven fat kine; we know that God completed creation on the seventh day--couldn't all this point out one of the great mysteries of the universe?

There can be no doubt that the Quran is pointing in the direction of a highly important scientific question.

* * *

Let us take another example--a scientific point made by the Quran in the course of another verse:

> It is God who splits the grain and the date-stone, brings forth the living from the dead; He brings forth the dead too from the living.
>
> **Cattle,** 95

Old exegetes have explained that the verse refers to the splitting of the date-stone at the point of growing into a new tree, which indeed means that a living trunk is coming out of a dead stone. Is it a coincidence that the cell also renews its life by the splitting of its nucleus, thus dividing into two cells? Note that the word **nawat** in Arabic means a nucleus as well as 'stone' or 'seed'. Can it be a coincidence that an atom would not release its energy until its nucleus has been split (atomic fission) so that living energy is released from dead matter?

* * *

Another example:

> Glory be to Him, who created all the pairs of what the earth produces, and of themselves, and of what they know not.
>
> **Ya Seen,** 36

Man has always known that God created 'pairs', male and female, in the animal kingdom, but not that such pattern exists as well in the inanimate world.

> And of everything We have created pairs
>
> **The Scatterers,** 49

In electricity we have both positive and negative charges.

In magnetism we have two opposed poles.

In the atom there are an electron and a positon, a proton and a neutron.

In organic chemistry we have the sinistral and dextral parts.

Today we know all about matter and anti-matter. Science reveals to us daily more about such duality (the 'pair structure') in all living organisms and inanimate objects. But in the Quran we already have a glimpse or glimpses of the existence of such a structure--a drop from the vast Quranic ocean, full as it is with mysteries.

* * *

One of the most profound of these mysteries concerns the Quranic description of the Day of Resurrection: the seas will boil and be ablaze:

> When the seas shall be aflame
>
> **The Darkening,** 6

When the seas swarm over,
When the tombs are overthrown.

The Splitting, 3–4

And by the Ocean set ablaze thy Lord's
chastisement will indeed come to pass

The Mount, 6–7

Here is an oath by the Ocean or the sea as it will be swarmed and set ablaze on the Day of Resurrection that God's chastisement will indeed take place. The oath draws attention to the importance of that event. The mystery of the sea aflame puzzled me for a long time. One day I came across a map prepared by a geologist showing the distribution of volcanic belts in the earth, whilst reading about volcanic activity in general; but the map started a series of reflections in a different direction.

The author, Dr. Poe, shows in chart after chart that most of the known 500 volcanoes are to be found in a circle round the Pacific Ocean, a line along the Mediterranean, and another line on the side of the Atlantic. More surprising, perhaps, is the discovery that the Pacific seabed consists of basalt which is a dark volcanic rock. This means that the burning inside of the earth is nearest to the surface at the seabed of the Mediterranean, the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. These underwater areas are the weakest parts of the earth's crust, hence the eruption of volcanoes and the gushing out of lava from the inside to the surface. The author also lists the greatest volcanoes which make up the 'wheel of fire' around and under water. He specifies the volcanoes of Fujiyama, Mayon, Tal, Karkatoa, Orzaba, Parikutin, Kutu Paksi, Shimbo Razwa and the triad Mt. Lassen, Mt. Hood and Mt. Ranier. There are also volcanic islands in the Ocean such as the Hawaiis, where a tourist attraction is a place

called 'Helioma' or the House of Fire, which is literally a fire pit: burning lava can be seen to pour forth incessantly, and fountains of molten rock gush out from the depths of the pit.

Of the Mediterranean volcanoes the second largest (after Vesuvius) is the Etna in Sicily. To the north of it there is the Strampoli which is always active: every night it glows with a reddish colour, hence the name given to it by seamen--the Mediterranean Lighthouse. In the Eastern Mediterranean there is another group of volcanoes, including the Mt. Ararat. In the Atlantic there are the Canaries, the Azores and Cape Verde--all volcanic islands. A statistical fact provides conclusive evidence: 80% of all earthquake activity occurs in the same belt around the Pacific Ocean and most earth tremours take place in the seabed.

The highest incidence of volcanic and earth tremour activity is to be found around and under water where the burning inside is nearest to the crust. It is prevented from causing a devastating explosion by the delicate balance in the earth's crust and the huge mountains which function as 'weights' or 'pegs' to keep the crust in position, to keep it firm--otherwise it would 'go down' into the surging sea of fire inside:

> and He cast on the earth firm mountains, lest it should shake with you and He scattered abroad in it all manner of living thing.
>
> **Loqman,** 10

Elsewhere the mountains are referred to as 'pegs' **(The Tiding,** 6). So, on the Day of Resurrection, when these mountains are blown up, the lava would gush out from the weak part in the crust, the seabed, and the earth would then be disemboweled of its burning inside:

> When the earth is shaken with a mighty tremour, and the earth brings forth her burdens
>
> **The Earthquake,** 1–2

All the water of the sea and oceans will be aflame, hence that 'sea ablaze' whose water had turned into fire:

> and Hell shall be brought out in full view for all to see
>
> **The Pluckers,** 36

We know now that the temperature inside the earth is thousands of degress high, that the centre of the earth is a furnace of molten metal, rock and lava; perhaps it is this inside that God means by His Hell:

> and Hell shall be brought out for the perverse
>
> **The Poets,** 91

> and Hell shall be brought out in full view for all to see

To 'bring out' is a specific term; it means to take something from the inside to the surface--to make it visible. Perhaps this boiling inside is the lowest grade of inferno where the dense and dark souls will decend. Is this not the fire 'whose fuel is stones' **(The Forbidding,** 6)?

These are just hints, glimpes; these are profound words. Herein lofty eloquence combines with scientific accuracy. Such a combination cannot be a coincidence. It cannot be a coincidence that the eternal words of the Quran should be corroborated by the most recent scientific discoveries of our time.

Chapter IV

Heaven and Hell

One of the reasons why I turned back on the Quran as a young man was the reference to the rivers of honey and wine in Paradise. As I liked neither I concluded that these were naivetes; I eventually applied this conclusion to the Quran and to religion in general.

It was I in fact who was naive.

I had not tried to understand the Quran; I had not even tried to grasp the surface meaning of the words. I was hurried in my approach as though I really wanted to turn my back on it as soon as possible. It was therefore difficult for me to perceive the truth, plain though it was before me.

Now what does the Quran say about Paradise?

> This is a similitude of Paradise which the godfearing have been promised: therein are rivers of water unstaling, rivers of milk unchanging in flavour, and rivers of wine--a delight to the drinkers, rivers, too, of honey purified;
>
> **Muhammad,** 15

The verse opens with a definite statement that it is a simile--a similitude--not a literal description of a place. This is only natural insofar as both Heaven and Hell belong in the Unseen and can never be described literally: we simply have no linguistic machinery for this.

It is as though your child asked you about the pleasure of sex when he had no experience of it whatsoever. You would be hard put to it to find the right words: how could you describe it indeed? Having exhausted all possible avenues, you might tell him: Oh! it's as sweet as sugar! Now this is a 'similitude' taken from his immediate experience and daily life; yet how different are sex and sugar! That is precisely what the Quran did in addressing the simple bedouin.

A bedouin living in hot deserts would dream of nothing nicer than a spring of fresh water. Most of the springs he comes across are either salt or stale (stagnant). So is it with milk; how quickly does its taste change in the heat of the desert! And so the Quran strikes a 'similitude', using for 'vehicle' the most sought-after object:

> God is not ashamed to strike a similitude even of a gnat, or aught above it.
>
> **The Cow,** 26

The purpose is to approximate to the minds of the simple a complex (if not an impossible) concept of the Unseen. All references to Heaven and Hell must be seen in the context of analogy--a kind of approximation through similes.

In the **Old Testament** Joshua describes the Day of Grace in similar terms; in the incantations of St. Ephraim similar language is used. Indeed, these are common images in all religions.

The Quran does not, however, leave us to struggle with nebulous similitudes; it soon sheds light on the subject.

> No soul knows what comfort is laid up for them secretly, as a recompense for that they were doing.
>
> **Prostration,** 17

The Quran shows us that the whole thing belongs in the Unseen which can never be expressed in earthly or human language. 'Comfort' is an imprecise term: the original Arabic is a common metaphor equivalant to the English 'warms the cockles of the heart'--again an approximation of the meaning which is impossible to grasp in **our** language.

Hell is, on the other hand, horrible: it is neither death nor life.

> and death comes upon him from every side, yet he cannot die; and still beyond him is a harsh chastisement.
>
> **Abraham,** 17

> Fear the Fire, whose fuel is men and stones.
>
> **The Cow,** 24

> Above them they shall have overshadowings of the Fire, and underneath them overshadowings; that it is wherewith God frightens His servants: "O My servants, so fear you Me!"
>
> **The Companies,** 16

Now this is another fact presented by God: He is using these words to 'frighten' people. But it is not a baseless threat, for this is precisely what happens when you warn your son not to neglect his teeth; "if you don't brush them, worms will eat them," you'd say, out of love, in the full knowledge that it won't be worms but rather invisible germs. Still, your threat was not baseless, for the consequences of neglecting his teeth might prove worse than an onslaught by worms. Anyone who has experienced tooth-ache will testify to that.

Hence God's warning of something that will definitely happen and will be more horrible than anything humanly imaginable.

Retribution is right, and reward is right. An objection: wouldn't it be beneath God, in His illimitable capacity for forgiveness and mercy, to punish a poor puny man worth nothing in the scale of God's infinite kingdom? This objection had bothered me for a long time and had made me reject the idea of punishment, and with it the Quran, and religion as a whole.

What we need in fact is to ponder the concept of 'punishment' more closely. God does not 'punish' people: He causes them to suffer the consequences of what they have done, which is only fair. It is justice, rather than punishment, that we really have here. If in the other world God equated the 'transgressor' with the 'transgressed against', the murdered with the victim, on pretext of mercy, nothing would be farther from justice. To equate the unequal is to be grossly unjust, and God cannot be expected to be unfair.

Indeed, it would be anarchy itself if God were to regard all actions and people as equal--the white and the black, the sighted and the blind, the hearing and the deaf, the living and the dead. The order of the universe forbids it. Examine the universe and you will discover that perfect order and those infallible laws governing it. Every motion is calculated, everything is measured to a micron. The transfer of an electron from one orbit to the next within the atom is done with consummate precision. The electron must release a certain 'energy band' equal to the leap it would make out of the orbit, then absorb another 'enrgy band' equal to the leap back into position. Infinitesimal, invisible and almost insignificant, an electron is governed by a universal law and is accountable for its movements. Wouldn't that be expec-

ted of rational human beings who, compared with electrons, appear as vast as galaxies compared to human beings? It is all the more befitting for man to be accountable for his action when God has breathed His spirit into him, and made him superior to all other beings when he is not as small as an atom or an electron!

Would it make sense if both wrong doer and victim are reduced to dust, after death, for ever, without hope of resurrection? Would all that a man's mind has earned, all that his soul has accomplished, go in vain? It would simply be absurd!

> They say:
> 'There is nothing but our present life;
> 'we die and we live, and nothing but
> 'Time destroys us'. Of that they have
> no knowledge; they merely conjecture.
>
> **Hobbling,** 24

Such 'conjecture' is necessarily wrong, otherwise life would be an 'absurd play'--a play without meaning or purpose:

> Does man think
> That he will be left
> Uncontrolled, without purpose?
>
> **Resurrection,** 36

A thinking mind could never accept such a conclusion: it would contemplate the creation of the universe and the perfect laws governing it, thinking:

> 'Our Lord! not for aught
> 'Hast thou created (all) this!
> 'Glory to thee!'
>
> **The House of Imran,** 191

It is impossible that all this should come to nothing: there should be some kind of continuity, and we should find out the reason for all this in due course.

The question is therefore not one of retribution for the sake of retribution, but one of justice and logic.

> But ye have indeed rejected
> (Him) and soon will come
> The inevitable.

The Criterion, 77 (Salvation)

He who lives a life of insipidity--refusing to 'hear', to 'see' and 'reason out', and insisting on denying the truth when it is there in full view--will be resurrected deprived of sight:

> He shall say, 'O my Lord, why hast thou raised me blind, and I was wont to see?' God shall say, 'Even so it is. Our signs came unto thee, and thou didst forget them; and so today thou art forgotten.'

Ta Ha, 124–126

It is simply something that you earn and which inevitably stays with you. God would not punish you: you would punish yourself by being ignorant:

> and We wronged them not, but they wronged themselves.

The Bee, 118

He who lives as an animal in this world, with no interests apart from feeding and copulating, will have an animal existence in

the other world--or, at least, an inferior position to those who have thought deeply:

> And whosoever is blind in this world shall be blind in the world to come and he shall be even further astray from the way
>
> **The Night Journey,** 72

In the other world differences will be greater, distinctions more prominent: men will be distinguished by more than the usual differences between a human being and an animal:

> See how We have bestowed more on some than others; But verily in the Hereafter is more in rank and gradation and more in excellence.
>
> **The Night Journey,** 21

> and humiliation in God's sight
> shall befall the sinners,
>
> **Cattle,** 124

Such humiliation will be painful; it will 'burn and torture' metaphorically--it will be a form of 'burning regret' over what a man has missed and the comparison of his position with other people's gain will be a source of infinite torment for him:

> Our Lord! any whom Thou dost admit to the Fire, truly Thou coverest with shame.
>
> **The House of Imran,** 192

Shame is regarded in this verse as more painful than fire. And as the Bible describes the other world as the world of 'tears and teeth-grinding'--when a sinner will grind his teeth in regret over

his humiliation especially as compared with the superior position of others--the Quran describes the good souls in Paradise as those nearest to God, nearest to the Truth:

> in an assembly of Truth in the presence
> of a sovereign Omnipotent.
>
> **The Moon,** 55

We are told that God speaks to them, looks at them. We are also told that they are established on symbolic 'thrones', facing each other, that is, having shed the low, little worldly 'hatreds', they are now loving brothers. Heaven is described as the 'home of peace', free from war, lies, bad language and idle talk. In verse 72 of **Repentance** the Quran describes the gardens of Eden, pointing out the goodly dwelling places and rivers etc., then concludes by saying that the believers will enjoy, better than all this, God's 'satisfaction':

> but the greatest bliss is the good
> pleasure of God: that is supreme felicity.

The position of the believers is gauged not by their physical pleasures but, more important in effect, by being capable of enjoying God's good pleasure. The same idea is stressed in the following verse which recommends 'prayer at night':

> And as for the night keep vigil a part of
> it as a work of supererogation for thee;
> it may be that thy Lord will raise thee
> up to a laudable station.
>
> **The Night Journey,** 79

It is essentially a question of position or station; and each man is assigned a definite one in the other world.

To recapitulate: punishment is meted out not for the sake of punishment; the sense of torment, of excruciating pain, comes

from the feeling that one has sunk so low, that one is inevitably humiliated, that one must 'live with' one's eternal loss, in envy of the others who have been spared that loss. Such a feeling should burn up sinners' hearts more than any physical fire would; it is a kind of self-punishment one has in consequence of the position he has earned by wrong-doing in this world.

* * *

That Hell-fire is different from the fire of this world is shown by the following verses:

> and they will bear witness against themselves that they were unbelievers. He will say, 'Enter among nations that passed away before you, jinn and mankind, into the Fire'. Whenever any nation enters, it curses its sister-nation; till, when they have all successively come there, the last of them shall say to the first of them, 'O our Lord, these led us astray: so give them a double chastisement of the fire.' He will say, 'Unto each a double but you know not'.
>
> **The Battlements,** 37–38

It is a dialogue in Hell between the unbelievers while being tortured by the burning fire; can such a dialogue take place in our kind of worldly fire? Certainly not. Furthermore, 'unto each a double' means that each individual of the earlier nation is taking double the punishment of the later nation whilst roasting in the same fire; **but you know not** means clearly that the source of pain is not the place but the psyche. Not that the torment is not physical; but it is probably moral as well. Two

people may be subjected to the same scorching heat in this world: one may get a headache, the other may escape unscathed. A headache may be both physical and psychological. Again, the reference may be indeed to a real fire, but it must be different form our own.

The Quran describes the 'Gardens of Paradise' in detail. We learn that the believers will be given fruits to eat like those they had known on earth (though with a difference in quality, of course). They will have wives, but these will not be ordinary ones; they will be 'purified spouses' not subject to the earthly ills of menstruation, labour etc. and, definitely, different from the jealous, nagging and domineering wives of this world. The verse says:

> Whensoever they are provided with fruits therefrom they shall say, 'This is that wherewithal we were provided before'; that they shall be given in perfect resemblance; and there for them shall be spouses purified; therein they shall dwell for ever.
>
> **The Cow,** 25

As such, Heaven must be only a station or position. It contains all we know on earth but vastly differs in degree. The difference is, however, unimaginable--like the difference between temporality and eternity, the difference (mentioned above) between the taste of sugar and sexual pleasure.

When honey is said to exist in such a Heaven, we must believe it is indeed honey though vastly different from the honey we know; and the same applies to milk and women. These will be completely astonishing and strange. A poet may

describe the woman he loves by saying that her body is made of light and is radiant throughout. It is an illusion, a dream; but it can come true in Heaven.

The same thing applies to the Quranic references to fire which must be different from the fire we know. In Hell a tree grows and bears fruit; it is called the **Zaqoum** tree. There is also boiling water to be drunk, and the people there talk and converse with each other. Their bodies should not have the same chemistry as ours--otherwise they would evaporate in seconds.

This means that we are going to be resurrected in bodily form but with vastly different bodies. We may be shaped in the same way but moulded from a different material which must remain unknown to us. At any rate, we will not have the same earthly bodies as we have in this world. Pleasures may multiply, physically and morally, in a mysterious way; and so may pain. And as people will be divided according to rank and category, each will have a corresponding degree of happiness or misery. I believe the highest ranks will be reserved for those who snub sensual pleasures and the sensuous Paradise; the All-Merciful will give them the privilege of pure spiritual life near to Him at the Lote-Tree. No pleasure could be drawn there from food, drink or women, but only from contemplating the perfection of God--from reflecting on the Truth, the beauty, of the ultimate and absolute good.

> in an assembly of Truth in the presence
> of a sovereign Omnipotent
>
> **The Moon,** 55

It is the position of the favoured--the Prophets and those similar in rank.

There are all sorts of ranks in Heaven, beginning from the low sensuous pleasures of food and drink and rising to the high spiritual pleasures which are pure and suprasensuous.

To recapitualte: Hell fire is not our kind of fire; Paradise is not exactly a fruiterer's shop; nor is God in any sense a tyrant. Indeed, God is the fairest judge of all because He maintains for men the stations or ranks consciously and deliberately earned by them in this world. Pain will result from the recognition of such ranks and from being subjected to a lower position than that of others for ever and ever. The final position of each will be as fixed as his fingerprint. And the pain will be real--almost visible:

> No indeed; did you know with the knowledge of certainty you shall surely see Hell. Again, you shall surely see it with the eye of certainty
>
> **Rivalry,** 5–7

* * *

Now because God knows that this pain will be great, He has warned and frightened us. He uses most expressive words and He sends down messengers to warn and bring good tidings, supported by miraculous deeds, Signs and Scriptures. He does so because He is All-Merciful. He is extending a hand of mercy, kindness and love. In a **Qudsi** verse (an address by God to Muhammad outside the Quran), He says: 'My mercy comes before my wrath.' In the **Fatiha** (opening chapter of the Quran) He says that He is All-Merciful All-Compassionate first then proceeds to say that He is the Master of the Day of Doom--the Day of Judgment, the Day of Wrath, when all people will be called to account, once for all. It is because He is merciful that

God keeps the door wide open for repentance, for redressing any wrongs committed:

> Say: 'O my servants who have transgressed against their souls, despair not of the mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: He is Oft-Forgiving, All-Merciful'.
>
> **The companies,** 53

He also sets down the conditions for forgiveness:

> But without doubt I am He who forgives again and again, to those who repent, believe, and do right--who, in fine, are ready to receive true guidance.
>
> **Ta Ha,** 82

After commanding the believers to observe their prayers, God goes on to say 'And the remembrance of God is the greatest thing in life without doubt.' **(The Spider,** 45) In other words you must always remember that there is Divine Power, that this idea be always present in your mind, and reflected in your deeds. This will help you and secure your devotion as a believer; it will be better than a prayer devoid of God's remembrance.

The Arabic word for 'remember', to be reminded or admonished, is **Dhikr.** It is a difficult word to translate, though we continually adumbrate its meaning: The Quran itself is called **Dhikr**, to believe or be capable of admonishment is to 'remember'. The following verses are given in two translations, the first preserves the original literal **Dhikr**, the second gives a variant in the light of its particlar context:

1. Only men possessed of minds
   remember.

The Companies, 9

It is only those endowed
with understanding
That receive admonition.

2. And when reminded, they do not remember.

The Rangers, 13

And when admonished, they pay no heed.

3. It is we who have sent down the Remembrance, and we watch over it.

El-Hijr, 9

We have, without doubt,
Sent down the Message. And we will assuredly
Guard it from corruption.

4. Now we have made the Quran easy for Remembrance.
   Is there any that will remember?

The Moon, 17

And we have indeed
Made the Quran easy
To understand and remember:
Then is there any that will receive admonition?

5. Then remind them! Thou art only a reminder;
thou art not charged to oversee them.

The Enveloper, 21

Therefore do thou give
Admonition, for thou art
One to admonish.

6. A Book we have sent down to thee, Blessed, that men possessed of minds may ponder its signs and so remember.

Saad, 29

(Here is) a Book which
We have sent down
Unto thee, full of blessings
That they may meditate on its signs,
and that Men of understanding may
Receive admonition.

7. The Godfearing, when a visitation of Satan troubles them, remember, and then they see clearly.

The Battlements, 20

Those who fear God,
When a thought of evil
From satan assaults them
Bring God to remembrance,
when lo! they see aright!

With minor alterations, the first of each pair of variants is Professor Arberry's, the second Yusuf Ali's: the first keeps the original meaning of the Arabic word regardless of context, the second adjusts that meaning to suit the position of the word in each sentence. But even so, most contexts call for the original sense to be preserved--namely that of memory, remembrance, reminding.

A long pause is required to ponder this 'sense': what kind of remembrance is it that is needed or ordered?

The most recent psychological theory tells us that all knowledge is hidden within the psyche, but heavily veiled by instincts and desires. Learning is in effect a remembrance--a lifting of the veils thrown by worldly existence on the psyche. There is no such a thing as acquiring knowledge by a **tabula rasa** mind. When a child is told that 2 + 2 = 4, he does not acquire any external information: he simply remembers an inborn piece of information. Similarly, the appreciation of beauty and music is a kind of vague remembrance of the Divine Kingdom--man's prenatal existence in the spiritual world.

A woman's beauty is, therefore, only transient, never 'abiding'; it is not, indeed, her own beauty, but a reflection from the Divine Kingdom. When the law of thick matter, of old age and earthly dust takes its course, her beauty goes.

Before we were born we had lived as spirits. As the previously quoted beautiful verse says:

> The Lord made them testify concerning themselves
> "Am I not your Lord?"
> They said, "Yes, we testify."
>
> **The Battlements,** 172

The verse relates what happens in the Unseen world before earthly creation. All creatures which God made, makes and will make are made to testify that He is their Lord. They all admit it, and God takes compact with them because he knows that they will **forget**-- perhaps **totally forget**-- whence they came, after they are born. The physical veil of the body is thick enough to blind them to the truth, so that they can't remember. In His mercy, God sends down Prophets to remind them. He tells Muhammad:

> Then remind them! Thou art only a reminder; thou art not charged to oversee them.
>
> **The Enveloper,** 21–22

He refers to belief or faith as a kind of life--

> O believers, respond to God and the Messenger
> When He calls you unto that which will
> Give you life;
>
> **The Spoils,** 24

--because to link earthly existence, through remembrance, with existence at a spiritual plane before birth, then with immortality in the other world, is to be conscious of one's life in its totality as an extension in time. It is life itself.

God is in no need of our prayers or our fasting; it is we who need them to remind us of the source of our existence, and to help us to draw on the ultimate source of life. Worship is an attempt to draw on divine power, which we need to live. We cannot live unless we actually draw on this power, the power of the living God.

It follows that God has ordained worship for our own good, not to make Him feel His Divine Power; indeed, He has no need of us, no need to punish us, no need to make requests or ordain anything.

> What can God gain
> By your punishment,
> If ye are grateful
> And ye believe?
>
> **Women,** 147

In other words, there is no pleasure or advantage to God in punishing His own creatures, over whom He watches with loving care. He indeed does not ordain or request anything, or even punish us; this is suggested merely by the surface meaning of the words, but the inner meaning which reveals itself only to those who work hard enough is different. God is merciful, His mercy absolute; He is just, his justice absolute; He is the giver, his generosity absolute; He does not **take** anything because He does not need anything.

The variety of punishment in this world should be regarded as an expression of God's kindness and mercy:

> And We shall surely let them taste the
> nearer chastisement before the greater;
> haply so they will return.
>
> **Prostration,** 21

God attempts to awaken the minds of those who still have time to remember, to see the light. To suffer lesser woes can therefore save a man's soul from the greater woes of the other world.

The Quran tells us that God means to awaken the heedless by making them suffer all kinds of worldly plights--poverty, di-

sease and pain--so that they may realize the transience of this world and the immortality of the other. He does it because He is merciful, and because He knows that the law by which they are to be judged is merciless in the end. If they suffer all these, however, without waking up to the reality, God may give them a different kind of trial: money! They would enjoy this life to the full, then have to face the horrors of real pain, everlastingly, in the other world:

> Before thee We sent
> (Apostles) to many nations,
> And We afflicted the nations
> With suffering and adversity
> That they might learn humility.
> When the suffering reached
> Them from Us, why then
> Did they not learn humility?
> On the contrary their hearts
> Became hardened, and Satan
> Made their (sinful) acts
> Seem alluring to them.
> But when they forgot
> What they were reminded of
> We opened to them the gates
> Of all (good) things,
> Until, in the midst
> Of their enjoyment of our gifts
> On a sudden, we called them to ac-
> count, When lo!
> They were plunged in despair!

The Cattle, 42–44

What appears to be a blessing may in fact be a plight:

> So let not their possessions or their
> children

please thee; God only desires thereby to chastise them
In this present life, and that their souls should depart while they are unbelievers.

Repentance, 55

What, do they think that because we succour them with wealth and children we vie in good works for them? Nay but they are not aware.

The Believers, 55–56

Worldly wealth, power and influence may be but trials: let not their possessors think that they are in themselves things that will bring them happiness.

We grant them indulgence only that they may increase in sin;

The House of Imran, 178

Apparent 'good' things in this world should not always be taken as a sign of God's satisfaction, nor should suffering imply God's wrath. 'Abundance' may indicate divine wrath, and a plight may be an expression of mercy. The truth cannot be ascertained except by reference to the inner voice--your conscience. If you believe that a plight has 'purified' your soul, it must be a blessing in disguise; if worldly gifts turn you into a 'rebel' against God, they must indicate His wrath.

The Quran describes 'the people of Hell':

Those against whom thy Lord's word
is realized will not believe,
Though every sign came to them,
till they see
The painful chastisement.

Jonah, 96–7

Having 'seen' the painful chastisement, they will say:

"Would that we were
But sent back !
Then would we not reject
The signs of our Lord,
But be amongst those
Who believe."

Cattle, 27

But if they were returned
They would certainly relapse
To the things they were forbidden
For they are indeed liars.

Cattle, 28

God knows that if returned to this world (if allowed, that is, to reassume the 'fleshly robes' they had discarded) they would resume their earlier position of 'proud rejection'. They are not merely ignorant, for the ignorant can learn; they are arrogant insofar as they refuse to recognize the Truth; they are incorrigible. As nothing could make them relent--not God's prophets, His miracles nor His fire--they should be made to suffer the penal fire physically. This being capable of making them **feel** the Truth, it must be seen as a sign of God's mercy.

God is always merciful, even when He punishes with fire; He is the All-Merciful, that is, He is merciful at all times and to all people, both worthy and unworthy. The worthy will go to Heaven, the unworthy to Hell: for, as explained, fire is a means of imparting knowledge to the hard-hearted, thick-headed people who could never otherwise be made to learn the Truth; it is an expression of mercy. One of the most beautiful verses reads:

> Said He, 'My chastisement--I smite with it whom I will, and My mercy embraces all things.
>
> **The Battlements,** 156

His chastisement is indicated as a form of mercy; His mercy 'embraces everything'. Of the reckoning God says:

> Read thy book! Thy soul suffices thee this day as a reckoner against thee;
>
> **The Night Journey,** 14

Reckoning appears to be a form of self-reckoning, self-confrontation and self-punishment. The work of each individual will be 'hung on him' like his shadow: there will be no way out when sentence is passed and eternal justice done.

These ideas are concealed from us because we read the Quran in haste or because we enjoy the sound of the words, heedless of their meaning. But the sound of the words, often awesome and impressive, is functional; the words employed to describe the Day of Resurrection are particularly awe-inspiring and their echoes ring loudly right through one's ears. That 'Day' is referred to as The Hour; The Terror; The Clatterer; The Earth-Tremour; The Crusher; The Enveloper; The Shiverer; The Scare; The Agony; The Catastrophe; The Indubitable; The Blast! The Arabic word for 'Blast' is unbelievably awesome: it could pierce your ear-drum! God knows that man is usually lured away from the Truth by the 'business of this world'--his desires and ambitions--and is often unmindful, deaf; he needs to listen to such words, perhaps they would awaken his lethargic mind:

> At length when there comes the Blast
> That day shall a man flee
> From his own brother,

And from his mother
And from his father

He Frowned, 34–36

To recapitualte: God's punishment is an expression of His loving care and great mercy; it is never imposed for the sake of punishment. Punishment is the fulfilment of certain conditions, justly and inevitably; it means that men's souls would be graded in accordance with the ranks they had already earned by their own work on this earth. It should mark the final curtain to this world where people are vying to make undeserved gains.

Let us illustrate such difference in rank by examples from everyday life. We feel, don't we, that we are not equal in rank? And I would like the word 'rank' to refer to the quality of human existence rather than to income or the standard of living. One may live at a physical level only, trying to satisfy his body's requirements, aiming at nothing higher than eating, drinking and copulating. One may quench that physical thirst but fall prey to another--a psychological thirst involving jealousy, envy, anger, schadenfreude, eminence, fame, power, the hoarding of money, fighting for domination and higher posts. Most people do not rise above this rank and their minds are used only to help them achieve these ends.

For most people life is a jungle; their natural emotion is aggression; they are constantly fighting for survival, struggling to get anything they can lay their hands on. They swing, pendulum-like, from one desire to another, inflamed by allurements and endless ambitions.

A few people can, however, discover the falsehood of this life and wake up to the realization that this kind of existence involves more slavishness than freedom. Such a life would look

like hard labour, or slave labour, in being dictated by savage, insatiable instincts; by inane, insignificant, worthless mortal ambitions. They set about silencing the ugly cries of the body and curbing their wild internal desires--as both the 'cries' and the 'desires' distort their vision and understanding. They do this by substituting love for hate and giving for taking. They gradually rise in rank in the sense indicated above. Eventually they reach a state of serenity and inner peace. They may now 'look back in anger', disgusted at having been their own slaves, driven around senselessly in a mad infernal vicious circle. In the end, they are truly 'liberated'; they have saved their spirits and recognized the truth, namely, that they had been undergoing a test--a 'trying' experience.

In rank the body may be comparable to dust, the soul to fire, the spirit to light. This is just an approximation; but, even as a metaphor, it does show that the 'business' of ranks is very real. A rank a man has earned in this world is kept by him in the other--which is only fair. It is not tyranny.

The pain would be indescribable if the souls had shed their earthly bodies, leaving nothing behind but pure, animal, rabid hunger; burning, insatiable, naked desires; and animosity growing among fierce souls, destined to be at war for ever, without hope of truce or peace. On the other hand, there will be the spirits of the few who will live in love and contemplate the truth in the divine kingdom.

I should definitely state that the awful-sounding descriptions of Hell constitute a warning of a real, indescribable self-inflicted pain; and the pain will be inflicted in accordance with the work done in this world. I almost see this as the absolute and certain truth. 'Far be it from God', as Milton would say, to punish for the sake of punishment; God is the Truth and the Fairest Judge.

Chapter V

Lawful and Unlawful

Nothing is made lawful or unlawful by the Quran without reason. The Quran makes lawful all that is good for man, and unlawful all that is bad:

> He allows them as lawful what is good
> and prohibits them from what is bad
>
> **The Battlements,** 157

God forbids all that is harmful, but allows all that is useful. The Quran's is not a wanton law designed to make life difficult for people; it is, on the contrary, an experssion of infinite love and mercy. Failure to grasp this basic fact will land us in a labyrinth of interminable details and the true spirit of the Quran will be lost to us:

> Say to the believing men that they
> should cast down their eyes
>
> **Light,** 20

> Say to the believing women that they
> should cast down their eyes
>
> **Light,** 31

The verse appears to make life difficult for us: why should God grant us eyes but commands us not to see? Why did He create beauty if we are commanded not to enjoy it? So much for the surface meaning. If, on the other hand, we look for a deeper

meaning we shall find that such a command actually saves a man from a wicked kind of slavery and is, as such, an expression of God's kindness to us. Apart from being indecorous (or against 'good manners'), staring is the prelude to attachment, and to be attached is to be the prisoner of a passion. When the eye stares at a beautiful face it becomes its prisoner, while God wants us to be free. The only way to freedom, we now know, is to go beyond sensuous pleasures in search of the 'sublime principles' in God's creation. Seeking the Creator in His creation will bring us nearer to God and make us hopeful of attaining absolute freedom.

Worldly temptations are made to test us--to establioh whether we would act according to the healthy principles of our human nature or attach ourselves to the inferior, sensuous beauty of earthlings? If the latter we would prove that something was wrong with our 'inclinations'--wrong enough to divert us from freedom to slavery. For the question is neither simply one of a beautiful face nor one of a casual look. The stare may engender a feeling, followed by a desire and, perhaps, a plan of satisfying the desire by possessing the object of the desire. The mind may fall prey to the desire and the man may literally lose his way: he may simply seek the woman in question, forgetful of what he had originally set out to do. Such a man will have lost his freedom and fallen out from his humanity to the animal position of a dog on the scent. Unable to free himself from the bonds of that 'bosom' or those 'legs', his mind would be lost in the anticipated pleasures of sex. With a watering mouth and bulging eyes he would forget all about his work, lose control, and allow a pair of trembling feet to take him where the flesh ordains. If actually taking place in the street this 'incident' may come to an end with his face being slapped or with an actual love affair beginning with pleasure but ending with slavery, if not with a robbery or a v.d. requiring hospital treatment.

The ruling by the Quranic verse on this kind of 'stare' is obvious. In fact, good taste naturally forbids it because of its harm. The Quran commands believing women to 'draw their veils over their bosoms' (**Light,** 31) in order to avoid possible temptation to men.

This is the essential principle of forbidding. The reason for prohibition is always the harm something does. God has established His law on the basis of love and mercy, not on tyranny and despotism. Consequently, to cast down one's eyes is to avoid possible harm, to protect oneself from the weakness innate in our physical nature.

* * *

As a principle, 'casting down one's eyes' does not apply only to women's bodies but also to other people's possessions. It implies that a believer should not covet other people's property but put himself above low desires--envy, jealousy and hatred.

One of the most heinous sins in the eyes of God is fanaticism. To be a fanatic means that a man is narrow- minded. A man is often prejudiced in favour of his own family if not indeed for himself alone; and prejudice often entails vanity and pride. Above all a fanatic is a man who worships himself, and his limited understanding of life, rather than God; he is therefore an unbeliever. The quintessence of religion is to go beyond yourself--to abnegate it. The surest way of achieving this is, of course, to control your desires, to harness your prejudices, to free yourself from your ambitions, and throw aside your vanity, your pride and self-involvement. These are shackles which our religion regards as unlawful because Islam seeks to liberate the human soul from their bondage.

The worst and most odious form of unlawfulness is, in the eyes of God, polytheism, that is, the worship of other things

than God. Polytheism is not the worship of pagan idols pure and simple; this is an old, naive kind of paganism that is dead and buried. Today's idols are not the pre-Islamic idols of ancient Arabia--**al-Laat**, **al-'Uzzah** and **Hubal**! Today we have abstract idols worshipped everywhere--the worst to be found. The most dangerous of these is the **self**: to make an idol of yourself, to worship your own opinions, your own prejudices and your own interests:

> Then seest thou such a one as takes as
> his God his own vain desire?
>
> **Hobbling,** 23

This is the God of today's world, to whom incense is being burned and sacrificial blood offering made--the blood of others, of course. Applying the criterion of unlawfulness we may ask: what harm can this do? Is there any harm in self-worship? There is, in fact, nothing but harm! A self-worshipper can have no life properly so called: he spends his days in a prison of mirrors so that wherever he looks he must see his image reflected. He would lie, steal, kill and exploit others. He could not listen to the cries of others because of the walls he has erected around himself; nor could he see any one but himself--his gains, his land, his property, his material wealth. And it is nothing apart from his very **self** that would constitute the walls around him. Shut in within these walls he could have no vision of the truth, of justice or of God.

Of such people the Quran has the following to say:

> and we have put before them a barrier
> and behind them a barrier; and we have
> covered them up, so they do not see.
>
> **Ya Seen,** 9

The barrier is nothing apart from yourself. The Quran says in a different context:

> But he hath made no haste on the path that is steep; and what will explain to thee the path that is steep? It is freeing the bondman;
>
> **The City,** 11–13

The reader is asked about the 'steep' path; he is required to think about it himself, being a difficult question indeed. Now elsewhere we are helped to understand that the steep path is the path of the **self.** There is no hurdle bei e you apart from that one. And the only way to get over it is to do good work. The work suggested is the freeing of someone in bondage. But couldn't that be symbolic? For you to free your bondsman is to be aware of the idea of bondage; you may realize that you are in bondage yourself and therefore try to break your own bonds. Can you succeed in freeing a human being without having freed yourself first? Once successful, however, you'll realize that you are, after all, capable of good work: you could love and contribute to life about you **and** your fellow human beings. This is the drift of the following verses:

> God has bought from the believers their selves and their possessions against the gift of Paradise;
>
> **Repentance,** 111

> Mortify your souls: that will be better for you in the sight of your maker.
>
> **The Cow,** 54

The original word for 'mortify' in Arabic may be rendered as 'kill' or 'slay' (as Quranic translators have done) but the meaning is obvious: the divine command is for the sinners to mortify their **souls** (not to kill themselves), and for all human beings to defeat the low desires of the **self** and emerge victorious against **themselves**. In the Bible, Jesus Christ says something to the same effect; God advises David to make an enemy of himself. When David asked how to reach God, the answer was: 'Leave yourself and come to me'. In the Quran God says to Moses:

> I am thy Lord; put off thy shoes, thou
> art in the Holy Valley, Towa.
>
> **Ta Ha,** 12

You cannot be truly in the presence of God until you have cast off your **self,** that is, both your physical appendages (and needs) and your worldly preoccupations (the shoes stand for both).

That is why self-worship is a kind of secret idolatry. It is the topmost forbidden thing and highest sin insofar as it entails all other sin and leads to 'consummate destruction'. You would be a disbeliever if you worship anything other than God, if you're the slave of your **self**, your desires and interests, if you're the slave of family or tribal prejudice, of racist or ethnic pride; if you're the slave of an abstract idea or a theory to the extent that you refuse to consider any other. You would be, especially in the last case, worshipping an idol, albeit an abstract one, carved out of philosophy rather than of solid matter. Understandably the Quran regards polytheism as an unforgivable sin; it blinds both eye and mind, paralyses all senses, stunts the growth of the spirit because it obstructs the spiritual journey to the source of light.

> God forgives not that aught should be with him associated; less than that he forgives to whomsoever he will.
>
> **Women,** 48

Polytheism means in effect the disruption of the umbilical cord which maintains the vital link between the embryo and its source of life--between man and God. Can you imagine what might happen if a sunflower turned its back on the Sun, preferring to face the moon, for instance? Would it not die? It does not worship the Sun because of its lowly station in life but because the Sun gives it life.

> O believers, respond to God and the Messenger when he calls you unto that which will give you life;
>
> **The Spoils,** 24

Worship is life and a seeking of light and the truth. God has ordained worship because he knows it to be the source of our life; he did not order it for the sake of giving orders.

* * *

It is not surprising, therefore, that god has forbidden us to drink alcohol or take intoxicating drugs--their harmful effect is obvious. Gambling is likewise forbidden on account of the financial loss it incurs and the hate it engenders. Fornication is forbidden because it involves promiscuity and anarchy: it disturbs family life and allows transient, **and vain** desires to rule supreme. On the other hand, marriage is made lawful because it entails a system; it allows man to bear **human** responsiblities, have a sense of discipline and enjoy peace of mind. Pork is forbidden. We know that the pig is a carrier of the influenza

virus and the tape worm, that its flesh consists of the toughest and most complex protein (amino acids). While all herbivorous animals--the gazelle, the rabbit, the horse, the camel, poultry and even the donkey--are gentle and meek, carnivorous animals are, on the contrary, fierce, ferocious and ruthless--the lion, the tiger, the hyena, the wolf, the fox, the vulture, and the hawk. There can be no doubt that a greater proportion of meat in the diet is associated with certain psychological qualities such as ferocity, ruthlessness and sharp temper. Because pork is the toughest and most complex animal protein, its harm may be greater than all other kinds of meat. God knows; we don't.

God is the All-Encompassing, Comprehensive Mind: He ordains nothing without a reason. He has established his law, specified what is lawful and what isn't, and ordained worship--out of loving care and mercy. We must always be conscious of this fact as it is the spirit of divine law.

Robbery is forbidden; and so is murder:

> Whoso slays a soul not to retaliate for a soul slain, nor for corruption done in the land, shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether; and whoso gives life to a soul, shall be as if he had given life to mankind altogether.
>
> **The Table,** 32

Wanton murder is tantamount to breaking all the laws; and God regards it as equal to the killing of all people. God also forbids self-slaughter:

> And do not kill yourselves: for verily God hath been to you most merciful; if any do that in rancour and injustice,--soon shall we cast them into the fire:
>
> **Women,** 29–30

To commit suicide is to have the most evil thought of God--to be blinded to his mercy, to despair of his justice, to break his laws and deny his other world. It is the greatest iniquity one can do oneself:

> and those who think evil thoughts of God; against them shall be the evil turn of fortune. God is wroth with them, and has cursed them, and has prepared for them Gehenna an evil homecoming!
>
> **Victory,** 6

As has been mentioned, God forbids fornication because of its harm. Now a modern European 'liberal' view rears its head: what harm can it do? What possible harm could there be if two **adults agreed** to enjoy the pleasures of sex outside wedlock but behind **closed doors**? They would, wouldn't they, be honest with themselves if they kept clear of everybody's way and did it as an **act of love**? What possible harm could this do?

To realize the 'harm' involved we must establish the natural framework of love and sex. Nature has intended that particular emotion, with the ensuing love act, as a means of reproduction--of survival for the human species and the peopling of the world. Love is therefore a means of production. When a man and a woman, on the other hand, seek a sequestered corner to have sex without planning to have a home and a family of their own (but merely, that is, to steal a secret pleasure) they will be distorting the 'natural' character of love and sex. To use modern terminology, instead of being functional as a means of production, sex will be practised much like consumer goods. The couple would thus be 'consuming', or wasting, a God-given honorable and vital energy. Though intended for the spread of

civilization by the progeny of mankind, this energy will be reduced to a means of inducing inane and insipid sexual quivers!

When two men agree to indulge in homosexuality they will advance the same argument in defence. They will tell you: 'we are here of our own free will; we love one another; we hurt no one; we are having pleasure but harm nobody at all!' Readers will admit more readily, I am sure, that this 'gay' case is abnormal; but there is abnormality in both cases. We should always be mindful of the universal law that governs all things. Both cases represent a deviation of the natural energy from its prescribed outlets in return for a few minutes of sexual quivers, the difference being only in degree--the degree of their repulsiveness and violation of the law of nature. The former couple who claim to be honest with themselves are utterly dishonest, utterly untruthful: for you cannot be honest and true to yourself unless you are true to human nature and to 'Nature' in the widest sense of the term. If a man acts against his nature he may be split in two parts and sadly break up into a body divorced from his soul.

If truly in love with a man, a girl should not say, 'I'd like to go to bed with you', but rather, 'I'd like to live with you all my life; I want you to be the father of my childern; I want you to share my home and be an honour to my name as a constant companion throughout the journey of my life.' If not, she would be lying to herself. She would be wrong, even if she claimed to be a Juliet. The sinner who prostitutes herself for a livelihood may have something to say for herself (she may claim to be utterly destitute) but the sinner who sullies the most honorable natural gift in this way will have nothing to say in defence, having had no motive beyond transient quivers and

silly convulsions! It is an 'itch' which requires a sedative, from time to time, in the name of love. A woman in love will seek a father for her children and a roof over her head• not a temporary treatment for the itch!

If turned into a habit, a regular conduct and a way of life, fornication must result in the utter disintergration of a person's character to a kind of split personality bordering on schizophrenia. The body would go in one direction, the heart in another, the spirit nowhere! Man's nature (human nature itself) would be destroyed. And herein lies the danger. It is this that explains the highest incidence of lunacy and suicide in Sweden and Russia, notwithstanding the sexual satisfaction and utter permissiveness of the young. Where inner peace is lost, in consequence of permissiveness, man's nature becomes unbalanced and madness sets in.

Religious teachings have, therefore, more profound reasons than appear at a cursory glance. They have practical purposes and material uses.

Why is marriage forbidden between brother and sister, mother and child, father and daughter? Our religion wants other kinds of love than passion to grow in the family--maternal, paternal and fraternal. It also wants the family to be closely knit by the power of mutual attachment--the only permanent link possible. The fire of passion (lust) is, on the contrary, a killer: it causes jealousy and possessiveness. If a family catches such a fire, brothers may kill one another in rivalry over a beautiful sister; the family would be doomed, having exploded from within.

God commands us to keep away only from things that are better avoided; he commands man to have what is genuinely worth having. Divorce, though necessary when an actual breakdown of marriage occure, is not a practice that God commends. Lying is the most odious of all cardinal sins:

> Very hateful is it to God that you say what you do not.
>
> **The Ranks,** 3

To lie is to commit a heinous sin:

> And who does greater evil than he who forges against God a lie,
>
> **Cattle,** 21

To assert falsely that one is a prophet, to tamper with holy scriptures, to claim that certain verses are revealed when they are a forgery--is quite unlawful because it does harm and misleads people.

Such is Islamic Law, and such its spirit! God has ordained all good things lawful, all bad things unlawful. Pure hearts will easily love the things decreed by God. There can be therefore, no contradiction in a believer's heart between God and his Law on the one hand and what he, as individual, aspires to, on the other. The two lines always converge--what a man wants and what God wants him to have; what he hopes for and what God hopes him to have. Listen to Abraham's supplication:

> My Lord, make me keep my prayers
>
> **Abraham,** 40

Abraham is asking God for what God is asking him to do--an expression of the deepest possible faith and trust in God's law. Here divine command and individual desire ultimately coalesce, as man wants nothing beyond what God wants him to have. People who have 'arrived', to use a popular term, must feel this way. In a **Qudsi Verse** God says:

> "O my servant, if you are obedient, I will make you godly: your hand will be as my hand, your tongue as my tongue, your sight as my sight, your will as my will, your desire as my desire."

It is a high rank reserved for those who are near to God--prophets, saints and good men--who are provided with God's own knowledge and power.

Chapter VI

Knowledge and Action

The first word of the Quran revealed to the Prophet was 'Read'

> Read!
> In the name of thy Lord who has created
>
> **The Blood Clot,** 1

It was the first divine command in Islam. Every man should read. Before ordaining prayers and fasting, before giving details of the creed and the law to be revealed, God said: 'Read!' The Quran is the only holy book which opens with this word, this command. It is a great honour to knowledge and to the learned that the first word in our religion should be a command to read, to acquire knowledge. The verse specifies the kind of knowledge to be acquired initially:

> Read!
> In the name of thy Lord who has created

--a knowledge of God, useful and virtuous knowledge. Subsequently verses were revealed (so many in fact) which command and urge people to acquire knowledge:

> and say, 'O my Lord, increase me in knowledge
>
> **Ta Ha,** 114

Say, 'Journey in the land and behold how he originated creation;

The Spider, 20

and God will raise up in rank those of you who believe and have been given knowledge

The Disputer, 11

Say, 'Are they equal--those who know and those who know not?'

The Companies, 9

God bears witness that there is no god but He and the angels, and men possessed of knowledge

The House of Imran, 18

In the last verse God places the 'learned' by his side, along with the angels, as far as the value of their testimony is concerned--which is the highest rank possible. The Arabic word for 'knowledge' and its derivatives occur about 850 times in the Quran. God swears by the 'pen':

'Nuun'
By the pen and what they inscribe!

The Pen, 1

It is not, however, only theoretical knowledge that is meant, the Quran means all knowledge to lead to action:

Say, 'Work; and God will surely see your work'

Repentance, 105

Wherever the Quran mentions the believers, their faith is made to lead to, or is associated with, work. 'Those who believe and

work righteous deeds' is such a common phrase in the Quran. The recurrence of such a combination as 'faith' and 'work' is meant to impress on our minds that no faith can be correct unless combined with work. It is the deeds that reveal the intentions; they are the concrete evidence of virtue, charity and obedience.

Because the first command in the Quran concerns reading and learning (nothing can be more explicit in fact) no ignorant man should claim to be a moslem, even though he prays, fasts, and plays about with the beads in his rosary all day. The ignorance and idleness on the rampant today in the Arab East means that we do not believe in the essential teachings of our book; instead of learning and work, there is ignorance and lazing about. Ironically, everyone thinks that he's going to Heaven simply because he happens to be a muslim by birth and to own a copy of the Quran! He never considers the fact that although the first word revealed in that Quran was 'Read', and that God consistently commands us to 'work', he neither reads nor works, preferring to kill his time yawning at cafes. Indeed, it is the West European nations today, exhibiting such an interest in learning, work, incessant creative and intellectual activity, that are nearer to the essence of Islam than the lazy and idle East, sinking as it does in a pool of ignoble ignorance.

Shouldn't we understand the Quran before claiming that we belong to the Quran? Some of us blame their laziness and ignorance on 'mysticism'; they believe that once in 'seclusion' to meditate on 'nothing' they have earned the title of 'mystics'. Shouldn't they too know that a mystic's real journey to God must start with learning and end up in work? A real mystic should learn first, then proceed to apply his knowledge to life; having enough good works to his credit, his 'station' invariably

changes and in time his rank in the eyes of God improves. The hard work of a mystic is the essential link between learning and the changed position he aspires to. He proceeds, to put it succinctly, from learning to work, thence to a higher station, and ultimately to a lofty rank. The early mystics were soldiers who defended their land, a copy of the Quran in one hand and a sword in the other. In North Africa you can visit some of the innumerable tombs of those **murabitin**. The word **murabit** in Arabic, which today generally indicates a mystic, really means a soldier who was 'tied down' to his position, having been immolated in his devotional defence of his home (from Ar. **Rabata** = to tie, or bind).

Courage, gallantry, truthfulness; to fight against wrong, in defence of right; to work for the prosperity of the world by vindicating benevolence and justice, fighting exploitation, and supporting the weak and meek--all are qualities and deeds essential to our religion, if they do not constitute our religion itself. If you don't take part in them, you'll not be a true believer; nor will you belong to the Quran.

Before taking any action, however, there should be knowledge. 'Read', first; be able to distinguish right from wrong, and know the laws of the world in which you live, before you can claim that you can reform that world. Careful to show us the way, rather than leave us to wild guessing, the Quran establishes a method, namely, to 'move and examine'--

> Say, 'Journey in the land, and behold
> how he originated creation'.

To 'move', to marshal observations, to record data, then to examine all available facts in order to establish the general law that governs them--this is the method of induction instituted by

Bacon a thousand years after the Quran was revealed. It was this method that helped Western scientists to make great advances in science and technology, to establish the ever-expanding base of modern industry. If we had made an effort to understand our 'Book' and act according to its commands, we should have beaten them to those sciences.

A few Arab scientists had in fact discovered that method in the early days of Islam: their contribution to human knowledge enriched the Western culture at a time when the whole of Europe had been plunged in the ignorance of the dark ages. We remember the pioneers: Jabir Ibn Hayyan, in chemistry; Ibn Arabi, in mysticism; Ibn al-Haytham, in mathematics and geometry. We remember the innovations of the Andalusian poets and musicians. We have heard of the Arab astronomers; in fact most constellations still keep their Arabic names in foreign books. The words used by Jabir Ibn Hayyan for the distilling apparatus he had invented, namely **Anbeeq**, is still used in French, viz. Ambique, hence the French verb **ambiquer**, i.e. to distil. The decimal system in mathematics was invented by the Arabs and thence transferred to Europe.

Our ancestors combined their knowledge with work, and the combination made a vast contribution to the march of civilization, the key for which being provided by the Quran, 'Read'. It was this key, the first **word** revealed, that Muhammad was commanded to convey to his nation. He who cannot **read**, therefore, is not worthy to belong to Muhammad's nation, nor can he claim to know the Quran; and he who has knowledge but does not employ it, will be inactive, ineffectual and unreligious. The Quran describes Abraham's building of the House of God:

> And remember Abraham
> And Isma'il raised
> The foundations of the House

(with this prayer): "Our Lord!
Accept (this service) from us:
For thou art the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing."

The Cow, 127

The mind is the architect, the hand is the worker, while the heart sings the glories of God, whispering the prayer: 'Our Lord! Accept this service from us; Thou art the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.' The act combined knowledge and work; faith and construction. Such is the true religion as presented by the Quran. In fact, the Quran has the best things to say about **working believers**:

Those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of creatures.

The Clear Sign, 7

And who speaks fairer than he who Calls unto God and does righteousness.

Distinguished, 33

It is stressed that all our deeds are recorded and that God will present us with the record thereof on the Day of Reckoning:

--And whatever
Deed ye may be doing,--
we are Witnesses thereof

Jonah, 61

On the day when every soul
Will be confronted
With all the good it has done,

It will wish there were
A great distance
Between it and its evil deeds.

The House of Imran, 30

Thus will God show them their deeds.
O Bitter regrets for them!

The Cow, 167

And they shall find all they wrought present, and thy Lord shall not wrong anyone.

The Cave, 49

The Quran emphasises that this world presents the only chance for good deeds; it is the only test allowed. Of the people in Hell, it says:

Therein will they cry
Aloud (for assistance):
"Our Lord! bring us out:
We shall work righteousness,
Not the (deeds) we used to do!"

Fatir, 37

But it would be too late, of course:

and even if they were returned they would again commit the very thing they were prohibited; they are truly liars.

Cattle, 28

It is all over; no excuse accepted.

The Quran stresses that good works done not out of faith cannot be regarded as good works; such 'good works' by a man whose heart denies its own Creator will be futile:

> And we shall turn to whatever deeds they did (in this life) and we shall make such deeds as floating dust scattered about.
>
> **The Criterion,** 23

> The likeness of those who disbelieve in their Lord: their works are as ashes, whereon the wind blows strong upon a tempestuous day;
>
> **Abraham,** 18

A question may be raised: how can a good deed be deprived of goodness if the heart of the doer is lacking in faith? If an atheist makes a donation to charity, wouldn't it be good work for which he deserves recompense? The answer is easy: an infidel, that is, a man who does not believe in God, will believe all work to originate in himself: he would think that it is he who contributes, donates; and if he is responsible for people's livelihood, he could cause them to be rich or poor. Such a belief is based on vanity and pride; it cannot therefore qualify any work to be acceptable as 'good'. When on the other hand, a believer makes a donation, he must believe that he is no more than an instrument of God's will: God has inspired him to subscribe to charity, having first given him money, a kind heart, and a disposition to generosity. Made in humility, such a donation would indeed be 'good'

The Quran stresses that a will to do good work, without actually doing it, is not enough to prove a man's faith. A desire

to fight in the cause of God is not enough: a man must actually fight; he must confront death and prove his fortitude:

> Did ye think that ye would enter heaven without God testing those of you who fought hard (in his cause) and remained steadfast?
>
> **The House of Imran,** 142

A will which does not take the shape of action must be less than genuine. It may be more of a feigned than a real desire, because only genuine desires lead to action. God tells us, in fact, that he created this world for this reason:

> He who created death and life, that he may try which of you is best in deed
>
> **The Kingdom,** 2

The world is a test of 'deeds'; and the result of the test will establish the ranks of every human being. Once established, there cannot be any change or tampering with the result. The verdict passed on the day of Judgment will thus be based on ultimate and absolute justice, being accounted for in terms of concrete deeds. The Quran says:

> O believers, fear God, and seek the means to come to him
>
> **The Table,** 35

and the means is, of course, work.

Our prophet Muhammad, the example we should follow, was not merely a man who conveyed the Message to his people, or simply a reciter of the Quran to warn and admonish: he was a

hard worker. He was the first to sally forth in times of wars: he led his army on the battlefield; he shared the life of his soldiers, their hunger and their thirst. He was the first to brave dangers. He was wounded once, we know, in one of his battles--one of the twenty seven he fought (though he was over fifty years of age). He was a prophet who conveyed a message, a soldier who fought his battles, a commander who planned both strategy and tactics, and a politician who administered the affairs of state with prudence. Apart from this, he was a devout, unworldly worshipper, truthful and honest, never sullying his hand or his tongue. He was a kind father, a good husband and a faithful friend, even while the call to Islam was his permanent preoccupation. We know that he never shirked a burden in the service of that cause, that he fought for it and would have died for it.

He is the epitome of incessant work.

He is the example to follow, if you seek to reach the right destination.

You can't get there except through work.

The only journey to God is upwards: on the stairway of good deeds.

Chapter VII

The Names of God

It is impossible to know anything about the real entity of God. It is impossible for a human eye to see Him, insofar as it can only perceive something that is finite in space and time. God, however, is transcendent, and infinite both spatially and temporally; there is nothing like him. In beautifully rhythmical verses, the Quran expresses this eternal truth:

> The knower of the unseen and the visible,
> the All-Great, the All-Exalted.
>
> **Thunder,** 9

> Who (dare to) dispute about God with
> the strength of his power (supreme)!
>
> **Thunder,** 13

> With him are the keys of the Unseen; none knows them but he. He knows what is in land and sea; not a leaf falls, but he knows it. Not a grain in the earth's shadows, not a thing, fresh or withered, but is in a Book Manifest.
>
> **Cattle,** 59

> To God bow down all who are in the
> heavens and the earth, willingly or
> unwillingly.
>
> **Thunder,** 15

All bows down to God; that which doesn't bow down willingly, does so unwillingly: for all must obey the natural laws of God--laws which he has established. The heart of the infidel, no less than that of the believer, is governed by the physiological laws established by the Creator: both hearts beat in accordance with the same laws, as well as every cell in every living body. Hence the following verse:

> What, do they desire another religion than God's, and to him has surrendered whoso is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to him they shall be returned?
>
> **The House of Imran,** 83

All beings have surrendered to the divine laws governing life. We today know many of these laws: Osmotic pressure; surface tension; the cohesion of the water column; electric and ionic balance in solutions; the chemical preferential law which determines the supremacy of one hormone over another; vacuum rejection; action and reaction. God and his laws govern and maintain the existence of all beings, from the atom to the vast cosmos. He is the **Living** and the **Qayyoum**, that is, he is 'self-subsisting and he keeps up and maintains all life'. The Quran presents the names, the attributes, and the deeds of God in beautiful songs of glory:

> God is he, than whom there is no other God; the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace (and Perfection) the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety,
> the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme:
>
> **The Mustering,** 23

He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the
Bestower of Forms (and colours)

The Mustering, 24

Of himself he uses a plural personal pronoun:

and we are nearer to him than the jugular
vein

Qaf, 16

The jugular vein is in the neck, which means that God is nearer to us than the blood in our own bodies--which is very near indeed!

Mystics say that God is difficult to perceive because he happens to be too near, that he is concealed from us because he is too obvious. We have known sun **light**, they explain, because it disappears; we can recognize the colours of things because of the **light** falling on them, (though we cannot know the essence of these things); we know that they are blue, red or green, because they absorb different wavelengths of light. Shade helps us to know light. But God has no antithesis to help us understand what he is; for God's light is always shining, everlastingly, without, any possibility of shadows. That is why we say that God is concealed from our sight because he is too bright and permanent.

Born in the presence of God, we begin by having limited rational faculties. As we grow up, we are diverted from the divine presence by our growing 'reason' and physical desires. Preoccupied at a later stage with worldly affairs, with worldly eminence and power, we reach maturity only to be diverted once more by so-called mature reasoning. Throughout these stages, the original feeling of divine presence becomes taken for

granted, and the marvels of God's creation in the heavens, on the earth and in ourselves become a matter of course--we simply get used to them and fail to be conscious of them. A mystic poet sums it all up in one line:

Too well known to be known; too obvious to be seen!

In other words, we are too absorbed in examining the phenomena to recognize the noumenon. It is as though one has received a book but instead of reading it, one focuses on the kind of ink used, the paper, or the printer's type. Indeed, one may read the book but forget that it ever had an author! Permanence blinds us to existence: we tend to be unaware of that which is permanently present: we are likely to be unconscious of the elevator's movement until it has stopped. The fact that God is permanent--continuously present with us--makes us unaware of his presence; being too near makes him difficult to perceive; being too obvious makes him impossible to see. He is the most concealed because he is the most conspicuous.

The only veil between man and God is that of man's own senses, the thick veil of physical desires which blocks our vision. However, God can never be veiled; as Ibn 'Ata-Allah al-Sakandari says:

> If a veil does exist, it would indeed hide him; but if anything hides him, he would be finite; Glory be to God and hallowed be his name! How can the infinite be finite?

One cannot see the pupil of one's eye because it is too near!

To the mystics God's existence needs no proof: it is the world that is called in question and so requires proof. They adduce the

presence of God as proof of the world's existence, not the other way round. Only those whose eyes are veiled may require proof of God's existence--those who see the Creation but not the Creator. Al-Sakandari wonders:

> Was God ever inconspicuous to require signs of his existence? Was he ever so far away to make worldly phenomena a means of reaching him?

Mystics are driven by love towards God, not because they are afraid of Hell-fire or ambitious to go to Paradise. They say they are on a constant journey to God--from the universe to the universe-maker. This is a different kind of journey. On earth one leaves one spot for another, only to return to the original spot. An earthly journey for them is a circling round, more like that of an animal moving a grindstone. But the journey they have in mind is a movement from the physical to the spiritual kingdom, from the world of the senses to the world of meaning.

Mystics are odd sometimes. They have interesting views which often prove profound enough. They say that sometimes an act of disobedience to God could in reality be better than one of obedience. An offence could on occasion make one afraid of God's might; it could teach you humility and submission. On the other hand, an act of piety may in effect make you feel proud and vain. A wrong-doer will thus be nearer to God and will have more humility than the pious. An act of piety, they explain, may make a man proud; a man may feel gratified with what is commonly regarded as good work; but the fact that he is conscious of this 'work', let alone being pleased with it, will make it valueless as good work.

Really good works 'ascend' to God the minute they are done (and so do good words) even before their author is conscious of

them. Mystics believe that a genuinely good man is never conscious of his good work; he is, on the contrary, conscious only of his trepidation in the presence of God. This is, in fact, their interpretation of the following verse:

> To him ascend the good words and the
> good deeds he uplifts withal.
>
> **Fatir,** 10

According to them thanksgiving does not consist in saying, 'thanks be to the Lord'. To be truly thankful is to obey your benefactor. Obedience puts God's gifts to good use, preventing them from doing harm to their authors and other people. Thanksgiving should be in deed rather than in words. God says, 'David's family, work in expression of thanks; few of my servants are truly thankful'. It obviously consists here of deeds not words. The mystic, the yogi and the monk are all trying to reach God, though taking different paths. They all believe that physical desire veils one's perception, just like a soul's vain passions or love of this world. Even knowledge can turn into a very thick veil indeed if a man takes pride in it. If worship becomes a source of vanity it will hoodwink the worshipper; and the same applies to good deeds. Consider the following verse:

> And they say: 'What sort of an apostle
> is this who eats food and walks through
> the streets?
>
> **The Criterion,** 7

According to the learned opinions of the exegetes, the meaning is that God has provided the prophet with human apparel so as to protect the divine mystery from being disclosed. In other words, the prophet should appear NOT to be a prophet!

The yogi, the monk and the Muslim mystic all seek to reach God by reciting his names, by singings songs of praise, and by piety, worship and good works. They call on God by repeating his names:

> To God belong the names most beautiful;
> So call him by them.
>
> **The Battlements,** 180

There is a special yoga exercise concerned with the songs of praise, called Mantrayoga, which comes from the Sanskrit word for incantation **Mantram** (cf. Sanskrit **mantar** = thinker). One of the commonest incantations is the repetition of the words "Raheem, Rehaam" thousands of times (equivalent to Arabic **Raheem, Rahmaan**) which are two of God's names in Sanskrit. The Yogi wears long strings of beads round his neck, consisting of a thousand each.

Islam offers man the shortest and safest path to God, the Quran being the only holy book that has not been tampered with or corrupted in any way. Al-Ghazali believes that Islamic incantation is at its purest when performed in silence--by the heart. In solitude and perfect stillness the spirit reads out the names of God, without the mouth uttering a word:

> Remember thy Lord in thy soul, humbly
> and fearfully, not loud of voice.
>
> **The Battlements,** 250

This is the highest rank in mysticism. It can only be attained by those who have serenity of soul, purity of heart, and, most important, the capacity for full concentration and the will power needed to defeat mundane interests and desires. Only those could hope to mount the stairway to God--more difficult than

flying to the moon because it involves a huge effort of the will against the soul's base desires.

For the would-be mystic the first step would be to defeat himself: the **self** is a veil, much as the mind and social conventions are. They represent man's outer 'skin'--the walls inevitably erected around him. If he can get over them he will be able to perceive his spirit in its virginal state; he will see what no human eye has ever seen, and hear what no human ear has ever heard.

Mysticism is therefore a method of perception with the higher faculties of the human spirit. The mystic is a learned man; his learning is designed to make possible communion with the perfection of God rather than the accumulation of such imperfect pieces of information as are provided by the earthly disciplines of physics and chemistry, or geography and history. He seeks to attain a kind of comprehensive and **total** knowledge using difficult faculties; and his instruments are therefore different from those used in positivist science and logic. This explains why the 'steep path' is regarded by the mystic as his own **self.**

> But he hath made no haste on the path
> that is steep; and what will explain to
> thee the path that is steep?
>
> **The City,** 11–12

David once asked God where he could find Him; God's reply was, 'Leave thyself and come; separate from thyself and thou wilt find Me.' Following this line of argument, some mystics have ventured an allegorical interpretation of God's command to Moses:

> Put off thy shoes; thou art in the Holy
> Valley, Towa.
>
> **Ta Ha,** 12

They assert that the two shoes are meant to refer to the soul and the body--the soul's desires and the body's pleasures. No man can hope to meet God until he has removed these two--the soul and the body--either by death or by mortification. They are compared to the shoes because they resemble the two feet with which the spirit wades in the morass of the material world. They were the cause of the spirit's fall from its original heavens to the earth.

You may object to the allegorical interpretation, believing the literal meaning to be adequate. But the former is necessary; for no man can gain admittance to God's presence merely by taking off his shoes. He must remove, in fact, all the trappings of the physical world, particularly the mundane preoccupations which weight down both soul and body. The mystical meaning is there, no doubt, and the verse must be interpreted in this way **as well**. But this interpretation is not contradictory with the literal meaning of the words. It is natural for a mystic to remove those symbolic shoes before taking his first steps into the holy valley.

That we shall be in God's presence after resurrection is made amply clear:

> and fear God, and know that you shall meet Him. Give thou good tidings to the believers.
>
> **The Cow,** 223
>
> Every one of them shall come to Him upon the Day of Resurrection, all alone.
>
> **Mary,** 95
>
> O Man! Thou art labouring unto thy Lord
> laboriously, and thou shalt encounter Him.
>
> **The Rending,** 6

'Now you have come to Us one by one,
as We created you the first time

Cattle, 94

and thy Lord comes, and the angels rank on rank

The Dawn, 22

And faces shall be humbled unto the Living, the Eternal. He will have failed whose burden is evildoing.

Ta Ha, 111

Ah, if thou couldst see the guilty hanging their heads before their Lord!

Prostration, 12

Their greeting, on the day when they shall meet Him will be 'Peace'. And He has prepared for them a generous wage.

The Confederates, 44

Upon the day when God shall raise them up all together, and they will swear to Him, as they swear to you, and think they are on something. Surely they are the liars!

The Disputer, 18

Will they wait until God comes to them in canopies of clouds, with the angels and the question is settled?

The Cow, 210

Some Islamic sects argue that it is impossible to 'see' God in the other world, opting for an allegorical interpretation of these

verses. Their argument rests briefly on the fact that the human eye can only perceive that which is finite, temporally and spatially, while God is infinite and transcendent to both time and space. This is, I believe, a flimsy argument insofar as it is based on materialistic, worldly assumptions, most important of which is that the spirit will use the physical eye in perception in the after life, that this eye will have a pupil and lids and so will be governed by the limitations of earthly time and space. The Quran refutes this, however, by stating that God will cause us to rise again in different forms--forms that are completely unknown to us:

> And creating you again in forms that
> you know not
>
> **The Terror,** 61

Would it be surprising at all if God granted our spirits the power to 'see' the infinite (to conceive if not perceive it) and so see God in the other world?

* * *

Now the Quran reveals to us 99 of the beautiful names of God. Some of these pertain to God alone, such as **Allah**, while others are attributes of His, such as **Kareem** (Generous), **Haleem** (Forebearing), **Raouf** (Kind), **Wadood** (Loving) etc. The latter category may be used as names for men, while **Allah** is naturally reserved for God. The quiddity of **Allah** is an inscrutable mystery which no human mind should ever approach, while the other attributes may be pondered at will.

God responds to any man who calls Him by his names:

> Call upon Me and I will answer you.
>
> **The Forgiver of Sins,** 60

> And when My servants question thee concerning Me--I am near to answer the call of the caller, when he calls to Me;
>
> **The Cow,** 186

-- which is true, of course. However, the call to God does not consist in uttering such words as 'My God!' Any man can cry out 'O God!' without being conscious of the meaning of the words. The call to God is in fact a most serious thing to do: it pertains to, if it is not, mysticism itself. Only men of lofty hearts, profound insight and great will power are capable of it. This does not mean that you must be a 'dervish' before you can expect God to answer your call. On the contrary, any man can expect it if he is pure of heart and, which is equally important, if he addresses God with an undivided sense of allegiance.

He who says, 'O God, grant me a hundred pounds!' makes an absurd joke. Money-making has its well-known worldly methods, but mysticism is not one of them: a small tobacconist shop on the street corner will do the trick! On the other hand, a mystic could never seek such material gains, because he sets himself a higher goal. Indeed, a mystic finds it difficult, out of decency, to ask even for better health; if unwell, he would still be shy to call to God for recovery. 'How could I presume', he would say, 'to have a will of my own which may be contrary to God's will? How could I ask Him to do something that He might not have originally wanted to do? I do not even know what is good for me or what is bad! How can the ignorant object to the knowledgeable? How do I know that my pains do not constitute the means of my redemption?'

This is carrying the matter too far, of course, and the Muslim is NOT expected to be an extremist. In fact, as the previous verses make clear, God likes us to call to Him. It is just that the

mystic would like to have his own and God's will concur; and, out of fear and humility, he would ask God for only that which God asks of him. He would ideally stick to the Abraham formula:

> My Lord, make me keep my prayers.
>
> **Abraham,** 40

That is, to adopt God's will as his own--out of love and respect for his Creator. Love is the highest object of the mystic: he would say

> Both Paradise and Hellfire are irrelevant,
> Neither can be an alternative to my love!

He sees God in all things about him. God is in no need of worship. The mystic says that the following Quranic verse--

> I have not created the Jinn and mankind
> except to serve me--
>
> **The Scatterers,** 56

must mean that God created the jinn and mankind to **know** Him, as it is impossible to serve someone you don't know. There cannot be worship without knowledge. And the first step towards knowledge of God is to **know thyself**. Self-knowledge will help you transcend yourself in search of the Creator of that self. Mystically interpreted, the verse implies all such steps of knowledge. Man was created to know himself first then know his God. Only thus can he hope to gain clarity of vision and actual ascendance through the conflict of body and soul.

This kind of ascendance is achieved also through integration, following a bloody battle between the dust-created body and the spirit.

We have created Man in trouble

The City, 4

Man was created to fight that battle and was promised the inheritance of earth and heaven if he won.

To serve the creator, even as a slave, is to enjoy full freedom among God's creatures; to be humbled down to the Creator is to hold your head high among all other beings. For serving God means primarily your freedom from worldly bonds--from being a slave to money, to your desires, to worldly eminence and ambition. He who worships God cannot worship the applause of the mob or pander to popular demands. In other words, you cannot be truly a servant of God until you have succeeded in breaking the fetters of these mundane masters: your heart will then be free to worship God and God alone.

You cannot, in fact, reach the topmost rung in the ladder of worship until you have succeeded in mortifying your **self** and your desires, so that whatever you want for yourself will be the same as what God wants for you. Your will must then concur with God's, and, having cast away all forms of servitude, you will attain ultimate freedom.

The mystic is a man of thought and meditation; he is extraordinarily sensitive and has profound insight. A typical mystical saying is:

> Your only genuine friend is He who, notwithstanding the flaws in your character, maintains your friendship;
>
> He is your God, your Creator, who knows you inside out; He knows what you hide and what you reveal. If you

disobey Him He would still shelter you; if you apologize to Him, He would accept your apology.

....

If you have a little to be joyful about, you will have as little to be sad about.

If you are loth to be removed from office, do not accept temporary posts.

If you claim to be modest, you are verily proud.

If you recognize God only in His blessings, you will be worshipping yourself, not God.

God created the world to put it in your service, but you now serve it; He wanted you to be a king, but you want to be a slave.

The mystic would thus address the theologians:

> You have acquired your knowledge by copying the ideas of the dead; but we receive knowledge from the living God. You refer to dead scholars while the real source of knowledge is always with you--nearer to you than your jugular vein. He is omnipresent; why leave Him and seek knowledge elsewhere?

That is why Muslim mystics describe their knowledge as **ladunni**, that is, 'from God', not copied from books. They describe themselves as the people of the Divine Presence. They under-

take serious spiritual exercises, fasting and praying to the point of complete mortification. Their means of reaching God is the recitation of His beautiful names, and their overflowing love for Him. They think of nothing else. There is nothing they see but they see God therein.

These are the 'Beholders of the Mystery', witnesses of divine power, and the nearest to God. They are saintly and truly good people. But they are rare indeed and difficult to find out. You would be with them but fail to recognize them for they never reveal themselves. A genuine mystic conceals his God-granted power as zealously as he covers his genitals; it is the secret bond he has with God, the sign of love and proximity. The bond between real lovers must be kept dark; if revealed, it will be vulgarized. Their law is:

> He who speaks is ignorant; he who knows is silent.

However, these must not be confused with the 'dervishes' you come across on the pavements, the beggars who litter the mosques, village idiots, loquacious quacks, impostors or professional faith-healers. Mystics are secretly pious. In a **Qudsi verse** God says:

> My intimate seekers live under My domes; they are known only to me.

Concerning the private relationship He had with them, God says in another **Qudsi verse:**

> My earth and My Heaven are not vast enough for me; the heart of my faithful servant is.

In another **Qudisi verse** He says:

> O my servant if you are obedient, I will make you godly: your hand will be as my hand, your tongue as my tongue, your sight as my sight.

How rare such godly men are these days!

Chapter VIII
One God, One Religion

In unequivocal verses the Quran states--decisively and in precise terms--that there is no god but God, that nothing truly exists but He, that everything else is vain and ephemeral. Revelation comes to Muhammad to state in definite terms:

> Know thou therefore that there is no god but God and ask forgiveness for thy sin
>
> **Muhammad,** 19

> All things perish, except his face;
>
> **The Story,** 88

Christ says in the Gospel, 'Do not call a father for you on earth, for your father is one, your Lord that is in heaven.' He also says, 'Go hence, Satan! It is preordained that thou should bow down to the Lord, your God, and him alone worship.' The Torah has words to the same effect. The Torah in fact describes God as one, unincarnate, who neither eats nor suffers any imperfections. All holy scriptures--the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran--are, as revealed, monotheistic books, commanding faith in one God.

The Quran states clearly and unequivocally that all 'people of the Book', that is both Jews and Christians, before the revelation of the Quran to Muhammad, would actually be following the right path if they adhered to monotheism, and that they

would be fairly recompensed in the other world. The Quran further states that even those who had directed their faces to the Sun as a symbol of God's power, that is, the Sabaeans, such as the ancient Egyptian king Akhenaton, were religious in their own day and would be rewarded. The same applies to the Jews before the advent of Christianity, and to the Christians before Islam: all will enjoy forgiveness and have their wages.

> Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Christians, and those Sabaeans, whoso believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness--their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.
>
> **The Cow,** 62

The Quran tells us that to imagine that 'religions' are contradictory is to betray crass ignorance:

> The Jews say, 'The Christians stand not on anything'; the Christians say, 'The Jews stand not on anything'; yet they recite the Book. So too the ignorant say the like of them. God shall decide between them on the day of Resurrection touching their differences.
>
> **The Cow,** 113

Those who differ over this do not understand the reality of religion; for in reality, all religion is one:

> He has laid down for you as religion that he charged Noah with, and that we have revealed to thee, and that we

charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus: 'perform the religion, and scatter not regarding it'.

Counsel, 13

Where 'belief' is concerned, it is definitely one religion. The **laws** instituted by that religion were, however, revealed by stages. Any apparent differences between religions are in fact due to the differences between these laws:

To each of you have we prescribed
a law and an open way.

The Table, 48

Christ says that his task was not to contradict divine law but to complement it. What we have here is, therefore, a **process**, or an 'advance in stages'. As the human soul advances to maturity, God appoints the right prophet and reveals to him the right law, that is, the most suitable for that particular stage. Further advance by mankind will require, however, more change and so more prophets are appointed to 'complement' the law, that is, to make it capable of keeping abreast of man's spiritual development.

In the time of Moses, the age of the Pharaohs, when power and violence reigned supreme, the law of justice was revealed to Moses. And the right kind of justice for that age was **equal retaliation**, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But as man advanced, the law of love was prescribed. Most memorable are Christ's words in the Gospel about turning the left cheek too. Such a lofty code of ethics could not survive, however, the tyranny of the despots and 'the proud man's contumely'. Christ and the Christians were persecuted, hanged and burned at the stake. Love was put to the hardest and worst ever test. The

mighty tyrants considered it a weakness and exploited it in crushing the advocates of love.

The Muhammedan law had to be revealed, combining the law of justice and the law of love. The new law may be rightly described as the law of mercy. The Quran says:

> And if you chastise, chastise even as you have been chastised; but if you show patience--that is indeed the best course for those who are patient. And do thou be patient, for thy patience is but from God.
>
> **The Bee,** 126–7

The Quran thus makes it legitimate to defend oneself by force (when the Gospel had forbidden it) so as to prevent the tyrannical from exploiting the weakness of the faithful, and to support 'Right' with the necessary physical power in the future. God knew that a time would come when only the logic of force would reign and only the powerful would dominate.

Though self-defence is legitimate, patience is to be preferred; forebearance is better. And the verse concludes with the direct command: 'Do thou be patient, for thy patience is but from God.' God promises, in other words, to help the faithful in showing patience. Furthermore, the Quran is quite explicit in tipping the balance in favour of love by advising the believers to reply to evil by doing good. The relevant command is precise:

> Repel thou the evil with that that is fairer.
>
> **The Believers,** 96

Such a careful and delicately balanced combination of justice and love, within the wider framework of mercy and kindness,

has been the right combination for man and will be so for the remainder of his life on earth.

God knows that man will undergo no further spiritual change, that he will succeed only in developing and improving his tools-- in making motorcars, trains, aircraft and rockets. Man may succeed in conquering fresh fields of science and rationalist philosophy but he will definitely fail to make any comparable advance in his spiritual constitution. Consequently Muhammad became the last of God's prophets: there was nothing more to say where the spiritual life of man was concerned. It is still our duty, I believe, to inquire into what has been said, and why God's messengers no longer come to tell us any more.

Religion is therefore one, and God is one.

Those who differed over this failed to grasp the fact that the Tablets, the Ten Commandments and other revealed laws were designed to match the development of the human spirit. God explains the matter further in the Quran, stating with the utmost precision that all prophets, separated as they were by great intervals, were actually the messengers of ONE Religion: He refers to them as Muslims and to their religion as Islam. Noah thus addresses the unbelievers:

> my reward is only due from God, and I
> have been commanded to be of those
> who submit to God's will in Islam
>
> **Jonah,** 72

And again the Quran uses the same term with reference to Abraham and his son (when building the **Ka'ba**)

> And Abraham, and Ismail with him,
> raised up the foundations of the House:

> 'Our Lord, accept this service from us
> 'Thou art the All-Hearing
> 'The All-Knowing!
> 'Our Lord! make of us
> 'Muslims, bowing to thy will,
> 'and of our progeny a people
> 'Muslim, bowing to thy will,
> 'and show us our places for
> 'the celebration of due rites;
> 'and turn unto us in mercy
> 'for thou art the Oft-Returning
> 'most Merciful.'
>
> **The Cow,** 127–128

And Moses too:

> Moses said, 'O my people! If you do really believe in God, then in him put your trust if ye submit your will to his as Muslims.
>
> **Jonah,** 84

Overwhelmed by the rising water, and about to die, Pharaoh said:

> I believe that there is no god except him whom the children of Israel believe in: I am of those who submit to God in Islam.
>
> **Jonah,** 90

Reunited with his family, Joseph had the following to say:

> O my Lord! Thou hast indeed bestowed on me some power, and taught me something of the interpretation of dreams

> and events; O Thou Creator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my protector in this world and in the Hereafter. Take Thou my soul at death as one submitting to Thy will as a Muslim, and unite me with the righteous.
>
> **Joseph,** 101

The Egyptian magicians who believed in the divine message of Moses said:

> Our Lord ! pour out on us patience and constancy, and take our souls unto Thee as Muslims who bow to Thy will!
>
> **The Battlements,** 126

Of Jesus Christ and the disciples the Quran says:

> When Jesus found unbelief on their part he said: 'who will be my helpers to the work of God?' Said the Disciples: 'We are God's helpers: We believe in God, and do thou bear witness that we are Muslims'.
>
> **The House of Imran,** 52

The Quran says that both Christ and his disciples are muslims; Moses, the Egyptian magicians who were guided to believe in God, and Pharaoh, who repented on the point of death, are muslims; Joseph, Abraham, Ismail and Noah are all muslims. Now the Arabic word for our religion, Islam, comes from the verb **aslama** which means to 'surrender to the will of God, to submit to His power'. But the noun Islam (literally submission

to God) also implies the recognition that nothing truly exists except God, that He is the Absolute Monarch of all Being. The fact that the Quran uses the same word in referring to each and all is significant. It is deliberate and definitely meant to establish the identity of all religions. No distinction may therefore be made between one religion and another. The Quran goes even further to command that no distinction be made between one of God's messengers and another: no prophet should be more favoured than any other:

> The Apostle believeth in what hath been revealed to him from his Lord, as do the men of faith. Each one of them believes in God, His angels, His Books and His Apostles. 'We make no distinction between one apostle and another'.
>
> **The Cow,** 285

It would be fatuous to make distinctions between one apostle and another, for a good Christian is a muslim, that is, he submits to God's will and recognizes His power--provided, of course, that he believes in all prophets, holy scriptures, the Hereafter and that God is ONE. As has been said, all religions are one as far as their essential creed is concerned. Their differences pertain only to the various stages of man's development which required progressively changing laws.

> As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou hast no part in them in the least: their affair is with God.
>
> **Cattle,** 159

> Those who deny God and His Apostles, and those who wish to separate God from His Apostles, saying: 'We believe in some but reject others' and those who wish to take a course midway--they are in truth unbelievers;
>
> **Women,** 150–151

Because faith is indivisible, you cannot hope to be a true Muslim if you believe in one Book revealed by God but reject another. To be a Muslim is to accept all that God has sent down--all His prophets and all His Books. Only thus could you be truly a believer in ONE God, and in all that He says (rather than a critic of what He says).

Muslin mystics use beautiful expressions in referring to this religious unity. One may describe another as having a Christian, a Mosaic, or a Muhammedan 'foot'. The first would be a man whose temperament and spiritual constitution are closest to the Christian canon and he may therefore opt for celibacy. The second would be closest to the spirit of the Mosaic law: he would have a fiery temper and could not suppress his emotions. The third would have imbibed the Muhammedan spirit of moderation, having his feelings always under control.

Mystics say this about one another, though they all are Muslims. They thus show a deeper understanding of religious differences which are regarded not only as necessitated by the historical stages of man's development but also as expressions of the differences in the spiritual constitution which may exist among the members of a single community.

It is with such broad-mindedness and breadth of outlook that religious multiplicity should be approached. Only thus, indeed, could we defeat fanaticism and recognize the ONE religion

whose source is the ONE merciful God God extends His mercy to any man who tries to reach Him. If you were a black man living in the African jungle and never heard of Muhammad or the Quran; if the only scripture available was the Gospel translated into your native tongue; and if you worshipped God according to this Book, God will understand your position and accept your worship. If you are an Eskimo and have never heard of any revealed religion, but have tried hard and recognized that God is ONE--perhaps by contemplating God's signs in the sky, believing the Moon and stars to be symbolic of Divine Power, perhaps hoping that by serving them to serve God (as the Sabaeans--e.g. Akhenaton had done)--you will have your recompense in the other world. Any man who tries to reach God, by whatever means available to him, will be duly rewarded. God's Heavan is ready, with wide open doors, to receive all men who genuinely strive to reach Him. God tells us that He has sent down 'warners' and 'messengers' to every place on earth:

> And there never was a people without
> a warner having lived among them
>
> **Fatir,** 23

Some of these messengers may be identified as the prophets mentioned in the Quran, but the rest have never been specified. God tells Muhammad:

> We did aforetime send apostles before thee: of them there are some whose story We have related to thee, and some whose story we have not related to thee.
>
> **Forgiver of Sins,** 78

God has communicated His 'word' to everybody, everywhere, though in ways unknown to us. The relationship between God and His creation is an intimate one--for us to understand fully. He sends down revelation not to man but also to animals:

> And thy Lord revealed unto the bees, saying: Take unto yourselves of the mountains houses, and of the trees, and of men's buildings.
>
> **The Bee,** 68

Such are the close and intimate links between God and His creatures.

* * *

After the death of Prophet Muhammad, God's Peace be upon Him, many people claimed to be prophets. From time to time false prophets appeared, and some even claimed to have received a holy book. Most of these were duly hanged and their spurious books duly forgotten. The real challenge facing a fake prophet was to furnish evidence of his relationship with God--the knower of the Unseen and the Visible. As the established legal practice puts the onus of proof on the claimant, the would-be messenger from the Knower of the Unseen must bring us fresh and genuine information from the Unseen. Evidently, if God sends down revelation to somebody, He must arm him with power over the people he is expected to guide, if not power over their natural laws. The latter would take the form of miracles or a holy Book which would capture people's ears and hearts, and puzzle their minds. This was, of course, beyond the power of the fake messengers.

Now to surmount this insuperable problem, the pretenders to prophecy set out to destroy the very foundations of prophecy by

denying the existence of the Unseen and the possibility of miracles. If they succeeded in doing that, the impostors thought there would be no way of putting their false claims to the test, so that they may join the Club of Prophecy unchallenged. But, as it was customary for every new prophet to recognize all foregoing prophets and their books, the new impostors had to recognize the Quran! To reconcile their recognition of the Quran with their denial of miracles and the Unseen, they had to come up with a heretical interpretation of the Quran to facilitate their misleading, destructive task.

They seem to have concurred on a so-called **inward** interpretation of the Quran. This means that they do not have to abide by the apparent meaning of the verses; indeed, they tend to discard the literal meaning of the verses altogether. So, according to this new-fangled interpretation, Devils in the Quran are symbolic of the physical senses, desires and passions; the angels are the good and benign thoughts; far from being a real creature, Satan is no more than a symbol of evil--the evil that dominates a man's soul; and the prophets' miracles reported in the Quran are allegorical, not factual occurrences. The staff of Moses was no more than the Mosaic Law, meant to lead and guide his people:

> 'Why, it is my staff', said Moses,
> 'I lean upon it, and with it
> 'I beat down foliage to feed my flocks'.
>
> **Ta Ha,** 18

The 'flocks' are his people. The Quran says that when Moses cast down his staff it turned into a snake which devoured all the magicians' false snakes. The impostors claim that this never happened in reality but that it is only an allegory. For here, they

maintain, we have the power and proof of Divine Law devouring the snakes of falsehood. Did Moses not silence all opposition in this way?

When Moses struck the sea with his staff the waters did not, according to them, part at all; the parting reported in the Quran must be interpreted as the parting of the ways, as the law of Moses (and his evidence--his staff) clearly parted right from wrong. When Moses, having 'drawn his hand close to His side', extended it 'white and shining without harm or stain', he was only in fact extending a symbolic 'good' hand to Pharaoh.

The resuscitation of the dead by Jesus is similarly interpreted as symbolic of the enlightenment of souls: he brought forth the ignorant into the light of knowledge rather than a dead man out of the grave. Restoring the sight of the blind man must be interpreted as equally allegorical, with blindness pertaining to the heart not to the eye. The Table set with viands which God sent down in answer to the prayer of Jesus is regarded as a symbol of intellectual food but no more.

In this way did Mirza Hussein Ali (who called himself Baha-ud-din) interpret the Quran to deprive it of the 'miraculous' and the Unseen (the angels and the devils). As has been mentioned. he did this to avoid being asked to perform a miracle or bring forth any information from the Unseen. He concluded that, far from performing miracles or having anything revealed from the Unseen, prophets were simply great social reformers who tried to help us live better. A prophet is a genuis and his real miracle is social reform--obviously an open invitation to false prophets. Any reformer may thus claim to have received divine revelation.

I do not know why Mr. Mirza calls this a Religion. He actually calls it the Baha'i Religion and insists that God revealed it to him. Surely it is no more than a social view, his own

brain-child; no one can dispute his authorship. Why should he assert that he has intimations from the Supernatural World when he does not recognize the High Beings of that world, including the angels? If he bases his argument on his failure to see the angels, the jinn or the devils, he cannot claim that his case is the rule rather than the exception. Indeed, some chosen men had heard the jinn, seen the angels, spoken to the devils and witnessed the Unseen. Should a blind man's argument be binding on the sighted? Is it not true that the argument of a single sighted person must be accepted by millions of blind people? If he can, and they cannot, see the Sun, wouldn't the Sun be there after all? Should we follow the opinion of the blind because they happen to be a majority? Should we appoint them to judge of the highest pursuits of the human mind whose prime precondition is vision? How could a discipline be called a religion when it is established on the lack of vision, the preclusion of the miraculous, the non-existence of the angels and the devils?

The answer to these questions is: they are all fabrications of a man who wanted to join the prophets' club without qualifications. He wanted to sneak his way into the Symposium of Immortals without passing the test. He denied the possibility of miracles and the Unseen to avoid presenting his credentials at the Divine Embassy he had invented.

This shows the grave danger inherent in the so-called **inward** interpretation of the Quran--of ignoring the literal sense and obvious meaning of the words. Such interpretation could result in uprooting religion properly conceived. It was resorted to by some sects in their internecine disputes--**al-Khawarij** (i.e. The Dissenters), **al-Qaramitah** (pertaining to Ibn Qarmut, the leader of a heretical sect with communist leanings), the **Batiniyah** (i.e.

advocates of inward--**Batini**--interpretation) and the **Babiyah**. They manipulated the Quran to serve their own destructive purposes.

Now we must establish the right method of interpretation which should be followed meticulously: an interpreter must not deviate from the obvious meaning of the words, guided by the linguistic structure peculiar to Arabic. Any deviation from that sense to an inward or allegorical interpretation must be guided by other verses from the Quran; put differently, the Quran is interpreted in the light of the Quran, the hidden meaning coming to the surface with the help of the obvious meaning. Nowhere should our inward interpretation be in conflict with the obvious sense of the words. Indeed, the hidden meaning will never be acceptable unless it confirms and supports the obvious sense. No license is allowed unless absolutely necessary. Such is the method made imperative by the nature of this perfect Book where no word is allowed to precede, where it should succeed, another, unless absolutely necessary.

Only thus could we preserve the dignity of the Quran and the sanctity of the Prophecy. No one could pretend to be a new prophet when God has said that the Quran was revealed to the last of His Prophets.

Chapter IX

The Unseen

The Quran is unique in devoting long **suras** (chapters) to information, reports and facts which are simply enigmas, coming as they do from the world of the Unseen. They tax our rational faculties in the extreme; our minds can neither deny nor support them and we are left with a difficult choice--to believe or not to believe? For the facts presented lack all concrete evidence.

My own explanation is that they are designed, apart from being pieces of divine information revealed to us by God, to test the depth of our faith. To support this view, here is what the Quran has to say about the believers; they are:

> such as fear God in the Unseen
>
> **The Prophets,** 49

> who believe in the Unseen
>
> **The Cow,** 3

These words, or words to the same effect, occur in many **suras**. The true believers meant are those whose instrument of belief is their own heart. They do not ask for material evidence; they do not ask you to **show** them God so that they believe in him, but believe in him as 'Unseen', that is to say, in their hearts.

The Quran actually refers to man's inherent passion for argumentation as a far from commendable quality:

> man is the most disputatious of things
>
> **The Cave,** 54

Religion is more of a feeling than a theory to be put to proof: it is essentially a state of mind rather than a rationalistic philosophy. To test this 'state of mind' or this 'attitude of heart', God presents us with a number of enigmas from the Unseen--things which can be neither proved nor disproved. Facing them we are plunged in paradox: we tend to reject and deny them, though we think we were believers! The fact is that ours was no more than surface faith; it was based on a rational argument, pure and simple. Examples of these enigmas are: the Angels, the Jinn, the Hour, the Throne, the Chair, the Path, the Spirit, the Scales, the Tablet, the Pen, and the Barrier. Most enigmatic of all, of course, is the Devil himself--Satan and his tribe. God says:

> Surely he sees you, he and his tribe, from where you see them not. We have made the satans the friends of those who do not believe.
>
> **The Battlements,** 27

> Whoso blinds himself to the Remembrance of the All-Merciful, to him we assign a satan for comrade;
>
> **Ornaments,** 36

References to this satanic companion (or comrade) abound in the Quran. God tells us that on the Day of Resurrection this develish companion will appear to man. It is always a jinnee, and his function in this life is to tempt man to do evil. When the 'companion' is shown to a person, regret overcomes him and he would say:

> "Would there had been between me and thee the distance of the two Easts!"
> An evil comrade!
>
> **Ornaments,** 38

Incidentally, this is a very subtle verse. We know that the longest distance on earth is that between East and West. This verse says, however, "the distance of the two Easts" as an expression of the greatest measurable distance! It cannot, therefore, be properly interpreted unless it is assumed that the West, where the sun sets, is at the same time an East, where the sun rises, somewhere else! And this could not be possible unless the earth was a globe that revolves around itself. If so, the 'distance of the two Easts' must be the distance between the farthest two points on earth and even longer than that between the East and the West!

This is just an example of Quranic subtlety. One needs to make a great effort to understand it. Such verses could never be properly interpreted at the time when they were revealed. It is also an indication that this business of the jinnee comrade, belonging as it does in the Unseen, could never be understood today. It must come to light at a later, preordained time. We must, however, believe it if we have healthy feelings, sensitive hearts, and a spirit that remembers its past existence in the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, to believe in the jinn and the angels in your heart is to give evidence that you vaguely remember the holy kingdom of God; it is a faith which indicates a spiritual power, not a meaningless and inane acceptance.

God proceeds to tell us in the Quran that man is not left alone with the evil jinnee comrade, but that he has another comrade, an angel, who inspires him with righteousness. This good angelic comrade, appears too on the Day of Resurrection to report on his human companion:

> And his comrade will say:
> "Here is (his record) ready with me!"

Qaf, 23

There are, besides these, recording angels, and 'watching' angels who work in the service of man unseen:

> Yet there are over you watchers noble,
> writers who know whatever you do.
>
> **The Splitting,** 10–12

There are also the Angels of the Throne:

> And upon that day eight shall carry
> above them the Throne of Thy Lord.
>
> **The Indubitable,** 17

How can eight angels carry the Throne of the Lord? Perhaps they are eight rows of numberless angels? Or could they be eight laws of physics or even metaphysics? Nobody knows. The Quran doesn't specify: it says 'eight' pure and simple, without qualification.

Again, what is the Throne? Is it a symbol?

What is the 'Chair'? God is described in the Quran thus:

> His Throne comprises the heavens and
> earth;
>
> **The Cow,** 255

This means that the 'Chair' is vast enough to include the heavens and the earth with all their contents. If the Chair is so vast, how much vaster can be the Throne? How can creatures carry it above? Perhaps they are creatures of a kind completely unknown to us, perhaps they are huge electromagnetic beings? Aren't the sun and the stars held in position in cosmic space by the laws of gravity which appear, therefore, as huge hands and fingers? The Throne may be a figurative expression. Just as we

say that the **Ka'ba** is the House of God, we may refer to something as God's Throne.

Then there is Gabriel, the angelic messenger and the Holy Ghost. It is reported that the Prophet saw him twice in his real form. It was a moonlight night when, walking alone in a place called **al-Baqee'**, the Prophet saw that angel for the first time: light drenched the horizon and filled up the sky above, whereupon, in trepidation, the prophet fainted.

> Indeed, he saw him another time by the
> Lote-tree of the Boundary
>
> **The Star,** 13

As for Gabriel's qualities and power, the Quran says:

> truly this is the word of a noble
> Messenger having power, with the Lord
> of the Throne secure,
>
> **The Darkening,** 19–20

The noble Messenger here is Gabriel who enjoys power and a secure position near the Lord of the Throne. He is also a teacher, and is again described as very powerful:

> This is naught but a revelation revealed,
> taught him by one terrible in power,
> very strong;
>
> **The Star,** 4–5

When God says that one of his creatures is 'very strong', that he is powerful and enjoys a secure power, that 'creature' must be mighty indeed! From the Quran we understand that Gabriel may come down to the earth in any form and take 'revelation' to any prophet, in any language, at any age.

There are other angels, of course, of lesser rank, and each has a specific post or station; in the Quran they state:

> None of us is there, but has a known station;
>
> **The Rangers,** 164

that is to say, a single job or function. No angel has as many faculties and talents (and consequently 'varied' functions) as man. Man is put higher in rank than many categories of angels. God "taught Adam the names, all of them" we remember, but when he asked the angels about them they said: "Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge except what Thou Hast given us!", the names being the variety of talents and branches of knowledge which secure man's superiority over other creatures.

God tells us that the angels have no sex; they are neither male nor female; they do not reproduce, eat or drink as we do. God stresses that they are neither his daughters nor his sons but are his creatures. Indeed, how can he have children when he is the Lord of all creation? He tells us, furthermore, that the angels are consistently obedient to God: they are deprived of man's freedom to disobey him.

> They disobey not God in what he commands them and do what they are commanded.
>
> **The Forbidding,** 6

As for the jinn, God tells us that some of them are good and righteous, while others are evil disbelievers. There are male and female jinn who multiply; they can hear what goes on in the world of men and whisper to them. Some of them are rebels who try, driven by ambition, to listen to what goes on in the

High Assembly of Heaven hoping to learn the Unseen but are hit by meteors and burned up. Some of them could do harm to man, but only if God wills it; just as recovery from an illness must be at God's will. It is blasphemous and ignorant, however, to try to placate the jinn, to curry favour with them or, indeed, to ask them to do favours (as help in recovery from illness) by offering sacrifices. To conjure up the jinn for worldly services will ultimately result in harm, not profit:

> But there were certain men of mankind
> who would take refuge with certain men
> of the jinn, and they increased them in
> vileness,
>
> **The Jinn,** 6

This is how the jinn tell us in the Quran about their attempt at 'listening in':

> And we stretched towards heaven, but
> we found it filled with terrible guards
> and meteors.
> We would sit there on seats to hear; but
> any listener now finds a meteor in wait
> for him.
> And so we know not whether evil is
> intended for those in the earth, or
> whether their Lord intends for them
> rectitude.
> And some of us are the righteous, and
> some of us are otherwise; we are sects
> differing.
>
> **The Jinn,** 8–11

The Quran stresses that the jinn are not acquainted with the Unseen, and that their attempts to listen consistently fail:

Indeed they have been removed
Far from even (a chance of)
Hearing it.

The Poets, 212

and that they die, and will be resurrected and taken to book just like men. The Quran also tells us about the life of the jinn in the days of Solomon and how God put them in the service of His prophet:

And of the jinn, some worked before him by the leave of his Lord; and such of them as swerved away from Our commandment, We would let them taste the chastisement of the Blaze; fashioning for him whatsoever he would: places of worship, statues, porringers like water-troughs, and anchored cooking-pots.

Sheba, 12–13

Regarding Solomon's taking of the Throne of the Queen of Sheba, the Quran says:

He said, 'O Council, which one of you will bring me her throne, before they come to me in surrender?' An efreet of the jinn said, 'I will bring it to thee, before thou risest from thy place; I have strength for it And I am trusty.' Said he

who possessed knowledge of the Book, 'I will bring it to thee, before ever thy glance returns to thee.' Then, when he saw it settled before him, he said, 'This is my Lord's bounty that He may try me, whether I am thankful or ungrateful. Whosoever gives thanks gives thanks only for his own soul's good, and whosoever is ungrateful--my Lord is surely All-Sufficient, All-Generous.'

The Ant, 39–40

We understand from the verse that he who has 'knowledge of the Book' was more powerful than the jinn, for he transported the throne in a glance. We have another reference in the Quran to the ignorance of the jinn:

And when We decreed that he should die, naught indicated to them that he was dead but the Beast of the Earth devouring his staff; and when he fell down, the jinn saw clearly that, had they only known the Unseen, they would not have continued in the humbling chastisement.

Sheba, 14

Here we have a man, Prophet Solomon, who dies standing, leaning on his staff, while the jinn all about him have no way of finding out whether he is dead and so continue to serve him unquestioningly. When a rodent or an insect comes and gnaws at the bottom of his staff, his body, its balance lost, falls to the ground! Only then the jinn realize that Solomon is dead, which is proof of complete ingornace.

The Quran also tells us that God taught Solomon the languages of birds and ants:

> till, when they came on the Valley of Ants, an ant said, 'Ants, enter your dwelling-places, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you, being unaware!' But he smiled, laughing at its words, and he said, 'My Lord, dispose me that I may be thankful for Thy blessing wherewith Thou hast blessed me and my father and mother, and that I may do righteousness well-pleasing to Thee; and do Thou admit me, by Thy mercy, amongst Thy righteous servants.'
>
> **The Ant,** 18–19

Such a reference to the language of ants was odd indeed in the past; we know better today. Science now tells us, on the basis of accurate observation and the actual biological evidence available, that ants and bees have distinct languages. In fact all insects which live in communities, cells and organizations have some kind of language: without a common language it would be impossible for such innumerable hordes of insects to have an organized life and a perfect distribution of functions. It is quite possible for an ant to be conscious of Solomon's presence, just as Solomon knew of God's existence.

Now the Quran tells us that Satan was 'of the jinn', 'he and his tribe', but that they were given a lease of life until the Day of Resurrection: they would die in the end, then rise to live in Hell for ever. It was the Devils who taught men to use magic, the magical tricks which could 'divide a man and his wife'. The

Quran explains that sorcery came first to the earth in old Babylon. Two angels, **Harut** and **Marut,** came down to the earth in human form to teach it. God wanted by revealing such mysteries to man, to tempt and try human kind; indeed, the idea of trying the soul of man by temptation occurs quite frequently in the Quran:

> Every soul shall taste of death; and We try you with evil and good for a testing,
>
> **The Prophets,** 35

It is to be noted that 'evil' occurs in the verse before 'good', because it is more effective as a test. The story of **Harut** and **Marut** is told in the Quran:

> Solomon disbelieved not, but the Satans disbelieved, teaching the people sorcery, and that which was sent down upon Babylon's two angels, Harut and Marut; they taught not any man, without they said, 'we are but a temptation: do not disbelieve.' From them they learned how they might divide a man and his wife, yet they did not hurt any man thereby, save by the leave of God, and they learned what hurt them, and did not profit them.
>
> **The Cow,** 102

God stresses, therefore, that using sorcery to hurt people cannot be effective unless God wills it. This includes an obvious, though implicit, admission of the existence of sorcery, apart from the facts relating to the time and place and method of its coming down to earth; but it condemns sorcery and sorcerers.

And the magician thrives not,
(no matter) where he goes.

Ta Ha, 69

Is this a sorcery?
But sorcerers will not prosper.

Jonah, 77

This sorcery of which the Quran speaks, which is again mentioned in the story of Moses and Pharaoh (when Pharaoh called the magicians to give the appearance of snakes to their staffs), and again in the story of Samaritan (the Jew who used magic in making a golden calf that lowed), and again in referring to the evil women who 'blow on knots'--this sorcery is an old, extinct science. It differs completely from the babblings of quacks around us. Nothing remains of it today: what we hear and see are impostors who do not know what they are talking about, and claim powers not their own. The old manuscripts where these mysteries were to be found have mostly perished; the extant ones are no more than scraps where real knowledge is marred by superstition. Similarly, very rare are those who can, and know properly how to, conjure up the jinn and put them in man's service; it is a knowledge that brings suffering and destruction.

What about the attitude of modern science to these mysteries? Briefly put, a scientist cannot claim to know or rationalize them. Some phenomena, such as hypnosis, could be regarded as magical in nature; they are recognized by science, though they are admittedly inexplicable. No scientist can as yet explain how the will of the medium is completely dominated by the hypnotizer; how the minds of the two men are so linked up that they act like a single mind: any request by the hypnotizer is imme-

diately responded to by the medium even if it were a command for him to be paralysed, to faint, or to levitate. All science can do is to give these phenomena special names and terminology; they may be designated 'suggestion', 'mediation', 'subconscious activity'--words, words, words!

There are again the phenomena of telepathy, clairvoyance, revelation, or epiphany. These are **facts** but are stranger than magic; science records them without any rational explanation.

* * *

In the Quran we hear of the **Barzakh** (literally isthmus) or partition, or barrier.

> and there, behind them, is a barrier
> until the day that they shall be raised up.
>
> **The Believers,** 100

This is the barrier which separates the spirits of the dead from the world of the living. The Quran throws light on it in two separate verses:

> And it is He who let forth the two seas, this one sweet, grateful to taste, and this salt, bitter to the tongue, and He set between them a barrier, and a ban forbidden.
>
> **The Criterion.** 53

The verse explains how rivers flow into the sea without getting salt: Fresh water remains fresh in the river thanks to an isthmus (a barrier or a partition) between them. The same idea recurs elsewhere:

He let forth the two seas that meet together, between them a barrier they do not overpass.

The All-Merciful, 19–20

It is obvious that the **Barzakh** is not the actual isthmus, that is, the dividing stretch of land, as this does not prevent the rivers from flowing into the seas. The real **Barzakh** must refer to the law governing this process, namely that the sea level is much lower than that of the river; if the opposite had obtained, sea water would have flowed into the entire stretch of the river. Again, when sea water rises at one point in the tide cycle (under the influence of the gravitational pull of the moon) it flows into part of the river mouth; now if the moon was nearer to the earth, a high tide would have caused sea water to flow into the length of the river, leaving us no fresh water to drink.

The **Barzakh**, the barrier, the ban, must refer to the physical laws which control, govern and keep everything in place. This explains what the Quran has to say about the dead:

and there, behind them, is a barrier until the day that they shall be raised up.

The Believers, 100

The **Barzakh** should not mean, therefore, an actual physical barrier separating the spirits of the dead from the world of the living, but rather the laws that prevent any contact between the two worlds. The spirits start a new life after death governed by different laws, which makes it impossible for them and for us to communicate: a **Barzakh** stands between us, and this must refer to the difference between our and their laws. The spirits may indeed be with us at a given point in time and place but

communication will remain impossible beacuse the laws of their existence differ from ours--there is a **Barzakh** between us.

Such verses as these throw light on the Quranic method of dealing with mysteries and the Unseen: it uses a code. Understandably; for it is not a book on hydraulics or physics which may be expected to go into scientific details. The Quran may use a single significant word, which would be sufficient. Look at this word, **Barzakh**! It is beautiful because of its connotations and 'enhancing suggestiveness'; it sets in motion a whole train of thought; and it will be up to us in the end whether to believe or disbelieve.

* * *

Next come the Pen and the Tablet; God swears by the Pen and what is inscribed with it:

> 'Nuun' By the pen and what they inscribe
>
> **The Pen,** 1

This is not, however, the Pen which we, devil-inspired, use in writing articles; it is the Divine Pen which God uses in recording our destiny in the preserved Tablet, or it is the Pen used by the angles. According to the Quran, God writes and erases:

> God blots out, and he establishes
> whatsoever he will; and with him is the
> essence of the book.
>
> **Thunder,** 39

Puzzling if taken literally, these words appear to suggest that God is given to writing, blotting out, and changing his mind like the rest of us. This is far from true, to be sure. The real interpretation must be that God is so merciful that he is prepared

to 'overlook' our sins to the extent of blotting them out if, inspired by him, we mend our ways:

> Surely the good deeds will remove the evil deeds.
>
> **Hood,** 114

'Remove' can mean 'blot out' and God is, of course, free to do what he likes. He is in fact giving hope for all sinners to repent, coupling his absolute freedom with absolute mercy. We have further instances of such absolute freedom in what the Quran tells us about God's days. One verse says

> and surely a day with thy Lord is as a thousand years of your counting.
>
> **The Pilgrimage,** 47

but another,

> To him the angels and the spirit mount up in a day whereof the measure is fifty thousand years.
>
> **The Stairways,** 4

which means that the days of God are as long as God wants them to be: he may create a day that is one thousand years long, and another with the length of fifty thousand. He is not governed by the 'times' he creates as we are: he is above all time and absolutely transcendent. This is a lofty philosophical explanation of the meaning of eternity, of existing above, that is, outside, time.

These ideas flash like lightning in the few words used. One can easily miss them if one does not make the necessary effort--

a tremendous effort equal to **Jihad** (holy struggle). Indeed, I believe that to read the Quran properly one must engage in a kind of holy struggle. He who reads the Quran skimmingly to reject it does himself, not the Quran, an injustice. The most profound ideas in the Quran are those concerned with the Unseen. A small word, even a monosyllable, which you may pass by in a hurry, could reveal the entire secret of existence. There are facts which you may scoff at--facts which you may reject off hand or relegate to the world of mythology and superstition simply because you've been reading books in English and regard yourself as an intellectual.

A saying by Christ provides an apt reply to this kind of attitude: 'If thou dost according as thou knowest, God will reveal to thee what thou knowest not' In other words, if you act like a good student who reads all that is available and acts accordingly, you will be capable of understanding the words which had appeared meaningless. It is the road taken by Muslim mystics who relied on 'revelations' from God in unravelling some of the mysteries they encountered. But no 'revelation' could come to them, they knew, until they had read the Quran, acted accordingly, and called to God in humility. Old mystics had sought knowledge, worked for it, then waited for revelation. It is what the Quran promises:

> And those who strive in Our cause, We
> will certainly guide them to Our path.
>
> **The Spider,** 69

and it is what the Bible promises:

> Seek and thou shalt find; knock on the
> door and it will open.

Such 'knocking', must be done whole-heartedly not by murmuring a traditional prayer. As has been mentioned, God may be kind enough to you (as he is towards his favourite servants) to enable you to see the angels, witness the Unseen and hear what no ear has ever heard:

> If God had known of any good in them
> he would have made them hear
>
> **The Spoils,** 23

> And fear God, and God teaches you
>
> **The Cow,** 282

God never breaks a promise, as we are wont to do:

> And we made covenant with Adam before, but he forgot, and we found in him no constancy.
>
> **Ta Ha,** 115

Now we come to the most inscrutable article of the Unseen--the Hour, or Doomsday. When will the Hour come is the most difficult question of all. It has never been answered, and never will be. God has revealed its secret to no one, not even to his prophet

> They question thee concerning the Hour, when it shall berth. Say: 'The knowledge of it is only with my Lord: none shall reveal it at its proper time but he, heavy is it in the heavens and the earth; it will come on you but suddenly!' They will question thee, as

> though thou art well informed of it.
> Say: 'The knowledge of it is only with
> God.'
>
> **The Battlements,** 187

It is a knowledge which God keeps to himself and has never imparted to any creature: and it is an awesome knowledge, as we shall see.

Chapter X

The Hour

The Hour is the apex of the Unseen. No knowledge of it is revealed to any one: only God has it. He tells us in the Quran, however, of certain conditions and signs of the Last Day. Some of these signs are thus specified:

> So be on the watch for a day when heaven shall bring a manifest smoke covering the people; this is a painful chastisement. 'O my Lord, remove thou from us the chastisement; we are believers.' How should they have the reminder, Seeing a clear Messenger already come to them, then they turned away from him and said, 'A man tutored, possessed!' 'Behold, we are removing the chastisement a little; behold, you revert!' Upon the day when we shall assault most mightily, then we shall take our vengeance.
>
> **Smoke,** 10–16

A reference to this smoke is made in the Book of Revelation, Chapter VIII, where a mention in made of the opening of the abyss and the rising of smoke as though from a huge furnace, whereupon the Sun and the atmosphere are darkened. We are further told .that such smoke would not kill people but only

torture them. People will seek death but cannot die. On this natural phenomenon both the Bible and the Quran concur.

The drift of this is: a kind of smoke will envelop the earth and clog sunlight; people will be in great pain for a limited period but God will relieve them. There are more signs in the Quran:

> When the word falls on them; we shall bring forth for them, out of the earth, a beast that shall speak unto them:
>
> **The Ant,** 82

> The Hour has drawn nigh: the Moon is split
>
> **The Moon,** 1

God asks His Prophet to warn all evildoers against that Day:

> And warn them against the Day of the Imminent when, choking with anguish, the hearts are in the throats and the evildoers have not one loyal friend, no intercessor to be heeded.
>
> **Forgiver of Sins,** 18

These signs will certainly remove any lingering doubts so that everybody must believe--the Moon is split and a beast has come out of the earth to speak! It will be too late for belief, however; it will be almost forced and will not count. People will have no option but to believe in anticipation of the rewards promised. How like opportunists who vie in declaring allegiance to a new regime once firmly established, in anticipation of material rewards! God will not accept this kind of 'faith':

> On the day that one of thy Lord's signs comes it shall not profit a soul to believe that never believed before, or earned some good in his belief.
>
> **Cattle,** 158

God always accepts the faith of those who believe in the Unseen, without need of proof, that is, without material evidence. The power of insight is above the power of sight, and the Unseen is the test of insight. Will the heart see what the eye cannot, and so believe and have faith in the Unseen? If a man does he will prove his 'high rank', deep insight and worthiness of salvation. If he doesn't, he will prove his inability to see, to hear or think, except, animal-fashion, with the physical senses; he will determine his position at the bottom rung of the ladder.

The last sign is that of Gog and Magog. This is an enigmatic story, mostly allegorical, wherein the Quran tells of an errant conqueror called **Dhul Qarnayn** (literally, the man with the two horns or centuries; **Qarn** in Arabic means either a horn, cf. Fr. corne, or a century). This man journeys into the earth and arrives at a mysterious place somewhere between two 'barriers':

> until, when he reached between the two barriers, he found this side of them a people scarcely able to understand a speech.
> They said, 'O Dhul-Qarnayn, behold, Gog and Magog are doing corruption in the earth; so shall we assign to thee a tribute, against thy setting up a barrier between us and between them?
> He said: 'That wherein my Lord has

established me is better; so aid me forcefully, and I will set up a rampart between you and between them.
Bring me ingots of iron!' Until, when he had made all level between the two cliffs, he said, 'Blow!' Until, when he had made a fire, he said, 'Bring me, that I may pour molten brass on it.'
So they were unable either to scale it or pierce it.
He said, 'This is a mercy from my Lord.
But when the promise of my Lord comes to pass, he will make it into powder; and my Lord's promise is ever true.'
Upon that day We shall leave them surging on one another, and the Trumpet shall be blown, and We shall gather trhem together.

The Cave, 93–99

It is a very mysterious story, and exegetes present us with two contradictory interpretations. Some say that Gog and Magog are the descendents of Yafith, son of Noah, and are actually the yellow races who live in China and the neighbouring lands. They had lived in ignorance and backwardness for centureies, while advanced peoples around them built up 'walls' of science and industry. The melting of iron and copper by **Dhul-Qarnayn** must be a symbol of this. This means that they had lived, until the introduction of science, behind a wall, or a barrier, of backwardness. We are told that when the appointed time comes

they will put an end to that, establish iron and steel industries, build a hydrogen bomb, multiply into thousands of millions, destroy their 'wall' (the barrier between them and the rest of the world) and conquer the earth in a war that must spell the end of life on this planet!

More than a quarter of a century ago, the late Field-Marshal Montgomery met Chairman Mao Tse-tung of China and voiced some of the misgivings troubling people's minds about China's possible invasion of the world. The answer made by the late Chairman of China was very precise, and I remember it word for word:

– All I know (Mao said) is that this (i.e. China's invasion of the world) won't happen in my time. After that I don't know.

Truthful and precise. Neither the man nor his regime harboured any hostility towards anybody. On the contrary, they offered assistance and friendship to all peoples. I wondered at the time, I remember, what might happen long after Mao Tse-tung had gone, when the population of a thousand million had doubled or trebled? I still wonder what will become of China!

I do not insist that this is a correct interpretation; indeed, it may be a wild guess, insofar as the whole matter truly belongs in the Unseen, and only God knows the Unseen. All that has been said in interpretation of the story of Gog and Magog is in fact pure guesswork--at least, no more than a learned surmise. As mystics say, these things are best explained by actual occurrence.

Still in Chapter XX of the **Book of Revelation**, we shall find the same references to Gog and Magog:

> After the thousand years are over, Satan will be let loose from his prison, and he will go out to deceive the nations scatter-

> ed over the whole world, that is, Gog and Magog. Satan will bring them altogether for battle, as many as the grains of sand on the sea-shore.
>
> 7–8

What is that nation which, with a population like 'the grains of sand on the sea-shore', will be mustered to fight the world when the 'thousand years are over'? Could it perhaps be the year 2000, which is less than twenty years away? Though the imagination is inflamed by the prophecies which follow and support one another, all you could do is hold your tongue. We are not properly to determine the validity of any interpretation. Of the Quran Revelation tells us that

> none knows its interpretation save only
> God
>
> **The House of Imran,** 7

He alone has the key to the 'code', as it were. He alone has knowledge of the Hour. True, we are allowed to venture 'learned' opinions on worldy matters, even to pass judgment with a reasonable degree of certainty we are not allowed to do that with the Unseen. No one, in fact, can.

The Quran tells us that the Hour will come when earthly civilization has reached its apex and man the apex of his progress. The earth will 'take on its glitter and deck itself fair'; man will think he has control of, and power to do, anything! He will be able to control rainfall, to cultivate the desert, to treat incurable diseases, transplant hearts and eyes, travel between one planet and another, split the atom and 'move mountains'. God warns us:

> till, when the earth has taken on its glitter and has decked itself fair and its inhabitants think they have power over it, our command comes upon it by night or day, and we make it stubble, as though yesterday it flourished not.
>
> **Johah,** 24

The verse is subtle. God says that the Hour will come 'by night or day', which can only be explained if we assume that the earth is a revolving globe--half of it day, the other night. When the Hour comes (and it will come 'as a twinkling':

> And the matter of the Hour is as a twinkling of the eye, or nearer
>
> **The Bee,** 77)

half the population of the earth will have day, the other night. The statement would not have been precise if it said that the Hour would come simply by day, or alternatively by night. To ensure the semantic precision of a promise which must be honoured, God uses the subtle expression 'by day or night'. And to underline the importance of this subtle reference, the Quran says elsewhere:

> Say: Have you considered? If his chastisement comes upon you by night or day, what part of it will the sinners seek to hasten?
>
> **Jonah,** 50

The sudden chastisement will, God says again, come 'by night or day' an invitation for us to think for ourselves.

Now the Quran gives the last sign of the Hour, namely the Trumpet blow and the Resurrection. The 'scenes' of Doomsday, as rendered in the Quran, are awesome--spine-chilling, in fact. The Sun and Moon are eclipsed, the mountains are blown up, the stars are darkened, the seas explode, the earth quakes, and all living beings in the heavens and the earth are struck by lightning, with the exception of those who will be saved by God to witness the horrors of that day.

All this will happen with the first Trumpet blow; the second blow will revive all the dead for the reckoning to begin.

In Chapter VI of the **Book of Revelation** there is a similar picture of Doomsday:

> And I saw the lamb break open the sixth seal. There was a violent earthquake, and the sun became black like coarse black cloth, and the moon turned completely red like blood. The stars fell down to the earth, like unripe figs falling from the tree when a strong wind shakes it. The sky disappeared like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place.
>
> 12–14

In the Quran Doomsday is thus described:

> When heaven is split open,
> When the stars are scattered,
> When the seas swarm over,
> When the tombs are overthrown.
>
> **The Splitting,** 1–4

When the sun shall be darkened,
When the stars shall be thrown down,
When the mountains shall be set moving,
When the pregnant camels shall be neglected,
When the savage beasts shall be mustered,
When the seas shall be set ablaze.

The Darkening, 1–6

In all verses about Doomsday the Quran tells us that God and the angels **come down**. Indeed, Doomsday always appears to me as a bigger version (that is, on a larger scale and with vaster dimensions) of the incident wherein Moses asked to see his Lord. The Quran tells us what happened then:

"Oh my Lord, show me, that I may behold Thee!" Said he, "Thou shalt not see Me; but behold the mountain--if it stays fast in its place, then thou shalt see Me."
And when his Lord revealed Him to the mountain he made it crumble to dust; and Moses fell down swooning.

The Battlements. 143

The same things appear to be magnified in all images of Doomsday:

They will question thee concerning the mountains. Say, My Lord will scatter them as ashes; then he will leave them a level hollow

Ta Ha, 105–106

What do they look for, but that God shall come to them in canopies of the clouds and the angels? The matter is determined.

The Cow, 210

and heaven shall be split, for upon that day it shall be very frail. And the angels shall stand on its borders.

The Indubitable, 16–17

No indeed! When the earth is ground to powder, and thy Lord comes, and the angels rank on rank

The Dawn, 21–22

and heaven is opened, and becomes gates, and the mountains are set in motion and become a vapour

The Tiding, 19–20

For the Trumpet shall be blown, and whosoever is in the heavens and whosoever is in the earth shall swoon, and save whom God wills.
Then it shall be blown again, and lo, they shall stand beholding. And the earth shall shine with the light of its Lord and the Book shall be set in place, and the Prophets and witnesses shall be brought, and justly the issue be decided between them, and they are not wronged.

The Companies, 68–69

There will be a divine presence, such as had struck Moses down and destroyed the mountain. This time, however, everybody will be struck down and all the mountains will evaporate. Elsewhere God speaks of stones which will

> crash down in the fear of God
>
> **The Cow,** 74

Nothing has power enough to be able to stand in the presence of God, even stones crash down. It appears that Doomsday is nothing but the revelation of God's face whereupon all forms of matter, unable to bear such power, will melt away. Nothing can stand firm in God's presence: the mountains will wilt away in humility, first bending down then evaporating altogether into a mirage. All forms of life will be struck down; there won't be a single voice, or the slightest sound of life, as God lifts the veil and reveals his glory. We come across this light in chapter XXI of the **Book of Revelation**:

> The city has no need of the sun or the moon to shine on it, because the glory of God shines on it,
>
> 23

It is the 'glory' which the creatures could not withstand in the beginning and so were struck down; they were thence resuscitated by God in another life for the reckoning.

> We make you to rise again in a fashion you know not.
>
> **The Terror,** 61

This means that this second 'rising' will be different: it will take a shape unknown to us. The Quran always speaks about a meeting between each man and his Lord:

everyone of them shall come to him upon the Day of Resurrection, all alone.

Mary, 95

O "Now you have come to us one by one, as we created you upon the first time."

Cattle, 94

O Man! Thou art labouring unto thy Lord laboriously, and thou shalt encounter him.

The Rending, 6

Those that sell God's covenant, and their oaths, for a little price, there shall be no share for them in the world to come; God shall not speak to them neither look on them on the Resurrection Day, neither will he purify them; and for them awaits a painful chastisement.

The House of Imran, 77

Leave Me with him whom I created alone

Shrouded, 11

and fear God, and know that you shall meet him; give good tidings to the believers.

The Cow, 223

> Lo! let him, who hopes for the encounter with his Lord, work righteousness, and not associate with his Lord's service anyone.
>
> **The Cave,** 110

Such an encounter could not take place if we still kept our human forms: if it did, it would be a doomsday on which all creatures will be struck down, all the mountains and seas destroyed, and 'the earth shall be changed to other than the earth, and so the heavens' (**Abraham,** 48). As the **Book of Revelation** has it:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished.
>
> 1

Now a little incursion into the significance of the Arabic word for Resurrection. Arabic **Qiyamah** literally means 'rising'; it is directly related to that beautiful name of God **Qayyoum** which means eternal in the sense that he is always **present**. To be in his **presence**, therefore, having risen to him, is the literal meaning of Resurrection. And to be in his **presence** is to be conscious of nothing else except that **presence**.

> ''Whose is the kingdom today?''
> ''God's, the One, the Omnipotent''.
>
> **Forgiver of Sins,** 16

The illusory kingdom in which each of us had lived, as his own, on earth, had come to an end; each of us had acted as a king, even as a god, with a kingdom and subjects to rule over;

each had heady ideas about himself; each had thought that he was all in all. But now the kingdom is in the hands of the real king, the Creator who had made everything and to whom everything must return. The key word in all this is God's presence. Indeed, Doomsday can mean nothing more than that 'God will reveal Himself', will appear truly. It is true that God is always present, everywhere; but there is a difference between omnipresence and the 'revelation of Him.'

With this revelation everything will be completely crushed; all material forms will perish. No form of matter can possibly survive the immediate presence of God in His Oneness and perfection.

This is the conclusion I have reached from examining the verses dealing with Doomsday. We have heard of new-fangled interpetations in the light of scientific theories of Doomsday: the moon hitting the earth; the sun dying out; the shrinking, burning up or expansion of the universe in space; or matter crashing into anti-matter. It is all, I believe, unnecessary. Man does die in the end, with or without reason. And just as death comes to the individual, it comes to a nation, to a civilization, to whole breeds of animals, and to the stars in their orbits. We need not trouble our minds with the reason for the end. It comes in accordance with a law decreed by the Maker who made everything. When the Maker tells us that there will be a Doomsday, we shouldn't bother with the reasons. Above all, we should not seek justifications: for it is the one and only absolute Commander who will have it done.

The Trumpet Blast is only a symbol of the Command. We have many names for it in the Quran: it is now represented by a blow in a Trumpet (we hear of the Trumpet Sounded), now by a

Scare, an Earth Tremour, or a Clatter. They all stand for a simple Command: "Be, and it is."

The Command is come: That is all.

It is the law. Everything is Doomed.

Each one of us has a minor Doom, Death.

But there is a major Doom, when time will melt away into Eternity, and everything is returned to the source.

There cannot be a shadow of doubt.

There is every possible reason, and ample proof at that, for each man to believe in his own heart, without arguing, without questioning.

Chapter XI

Resurrection

Addressing His Prophet in the Quran, God says:

> Thou art dead; and they are dead.
>
> **The Companies,** 30

The meaning is obvious; for 'dead' means 'wilt die', 'mortal', etc., (and most translations have paraphrased it). But the actual word in Arabic (notwithstanding the obvious, or surface meaning) is 'dead', and its implication is all-important. It can thus be interpreted: "You live through God, you hear and speak through God, just like all mortal men: Everyone lives through God, sees through God, and hears through God, but is in himself **dead**: he has no independent life in himself: Each and all depend for existence on the one God who is the Creator and who, All-Sufficient, needs nothing."

The statement 'Thou art dead' is violent enough to awaken the 'sense': it brings you face to face with a terrible reality--a present not a future state. Each one of us is carrying his corpse on his shoulders (i.e. to the grave): in every drop of perspiration, in every drop of saliva, he casts away a dead piece of his body, just as a tree sheds its dead leaves every day.

Death is at every moment present, at every moment adjourned.

The only living reality is God.

We live literally on borrowed time, on a loan of life which,

advanced by God, must be repaid some time. God thus addresses Muhammad in a **Qudsi** verse:

> "Live as thou wilt; thou wilt die, love whomever thou wilt: thou wilt leave them; possess whatever thou wilt: it is buried in the dust; work as thou wilt: your work will be thy companion."

In vain we love, for we inevitably leave our loves. All love ends in regret, except our love for God, the Living, the Immortal and Everlasting. In vain we possess, for we shall inevitably depart from our possessions. We shall accompany nothing except our work. The warning of death, of mortality, is repeated dozens of times in the Quran to draw our attention to the obvious and certain fact of life's end. Ours is a finite life, though nobody seems to heed it. We all live and act as though we were immortals; hence avarice, mendacity, robbery, murder, tyranny and despotism; the offenders believe they are secure, and will live for ever.

The Quran decides that the 'majority' are wrong and ignorant. In matters of faith, it warns us not to pursue the path of the 'majority': most people know how to eat and drink but not how to reach the truth:

> And the most of them follow only surmise, and surmise avails naught against the truth.
>
> **Jonah,** 36

> Yet most men refuse all but unbelief
>
> **The Night Journey,** 89

We found no covenant in the most part of them; indeed, we found the most part of them ungodly.

The Battlements, 102

if thou obeyst the most part of those on earth they will lead thee astray from the path of God; they follow only surmise, merely conjecturing.

Cattle, 116

Or deemest thou that most of them hear or understand?They are but as the cattle; nay, they are further astray from the way.

The Criterion, 44

The Word has been realized against most of them, for they do not believe

Ya Seen, 7

he has brought them the truth, but most of them are averse from the truth.

The Believers, 70

If Muhammad had started the call to Islam by inviting the people of Mecca to a referendum on the single question of 'God or your idols?' the overwhelming majority would have chosen idols. The recognition of the truth will always be the prerogative of the elite. You can, however, refer to the majority in all questions pertaining to the 'business of living', of food and drink, of money and reproduction; they know these things very

well and vie, instinctively, to attain greater portions of them. But wasn't it the majority that voted in the past for the execution of Socrates, the burning of St. Bruno, and the imprisonment of Galileo--when given a chance to pronounce on matters of philosophy, faith and science, respectively? A scientist may spend his whole life studying a worm or dissecting an ant, which is absolutely incomprehensible to the masses, with their usual mob mentality. A 'mob mind' could never understand the purpose of such studies: it finds it difficult to see that they may lead to a series of researches culminating in the discovery of a special vaccine to combat polio, smallpox or flu--in short, that they serve man's interests.

Most people seek immediate and concrete profit: they are the slaves of their stomachs and desires. Rather than implying disrespect for the majority I am trying to explain its limitations. He who seeks the opinion of the majority in electromagnetic problems will be unfair to the majority, to himself and to electromagnetism. Leadership in matters of thought and science belongs rightly to the elite. Any course of action must be decided, however, by consultation among all scientists and intellectuals NOT dictated by a single individual:

> and take counsel with them
>
> **The House of Imran,** 159

> Their affairs being determined by counsel among themselves
>
> **Counsel,** 38

> thou art not a tyrant over them
>
> **Qaf,** 45

Then remind them! Thou art only a reminder; thou are not charged to oversee them

The Enveloper, 21–22

and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God

The House of Imran, 64

The Quran is against what is today described as the 'individual cult', and aganist 'dictatorship'--even if the 'individual' happens to be a prophet. The rule is consultation, cooperation and brotherhood:

The believers indeed are brothers

Apartments, 10

Help one another to piety and god-fearing; do not help each other to sin and enmity.

The Table, 2

God commands you to deliver trusts back to their owners; and when you judge between the people, that you judge with justice.

Women, 58

The Quran emphasizes that there are different classes of people. But these are not defined in terms of material possessions--capital, real-estate or income--but in terms of their varying shares of knowledge, erudition and piety. Spirits are never

equal, even if the bodies have equal claims to the human rights of justice, sufficiency etc.

> God will raise up in rank those of you who believe and have been given knowledge.
>
> **The Disputer,** 11

> And those Messengers, some we have preferred above others;
>
> **The Cow,** 253

> Say: Are they equal--those who know and those who know not?
>
> **The Companies,** 9

> Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you
>
> **Apartments,** 13

For all these 'swift indicators', the Quran has not laid down a definite political system, but allowed people to resort to interpretation, because temporal political systems are changeable. Indeed, all 'systems' are designed to suit specific times and they change all the time! The Quran is, however, a timeless book: it includes timeless knowledge and lasting facts but cares little for temporal matters. The Quran is a book on religion and ethics rather than politics. Even so, it does offer 'general recommendations' which should ensure ideal government:

> Individual freedom must be sanctified. The elite should be in charge of all matters pertaining to the

> intellectual and cultural life of the nation; the majority may be consulted only in matters directly related to the 'business of living'. Government by the elite should be based on consultation not tyranny; it should aim at securing justice and economic sufficiency, at combating iniquity and exploitation.

The 'method' to be adopted in applying these principles and the 'political' details entailed are open to discussion. Interpretation is invited; the Quran makes no reference to such 'details'. After all, the Quran is a book addressed to the heart of the individual; it seeks to guide and 'save' the individual so that the group of individuals we call society may be guided and 'saved' ultimately. In other words, it does not seek to improve that vague entity we call the 'community' in order to improve the individual but takes its point of departure in individual hearts and minds. Rather than knock on the door of politics to change a society, it knocks on the door of the heart to guide the individuals; of the individual the Quran says:

> Whoso slays a soul not to retaliate for a soul slain, nor for corruption done in the land, shall be as if he has slain mankind altogether; and whoso gives life to a soul, shall be as if he had given life to mankind altogther.
>
> **The Table,** 32

To kill a single individual unjustly and wrongfully, even though for the purpose of ensuring material gains or reforms, is to destroy a divine law and 'slay all of mankind'. Such is the value of the individual soul in Quranic Law. The individual is a an absolute entity in himself: he has dignity, sanctity and freedom. Respect for this freedom is the prime prerequisite of real worship.

A man dies physically, it is true, in this world; but he has absolute life on another plane, that is, spiritually. He has immortality. He cannot be regarded as a cog in the social wheel, a screw which may be removed and replaced at will, whatever the modern slogans used to justify this. Slogans change with worldly systems but the spirit of man is immortal; it should be respected in itself and for itself.

It is this admirable sanctification of the individual, and of individual freedom, that distinguishes all religions from the materialist creed of Marxism which preaches that an individual has no real existence and is doomed to nothingness, being merely the outcome of his age, circumstances and society. The Marxist materialists believe that the human soul consists of a group of reactions--of circumstantial and conditional reflexes; that it serves the body and is completely dependent upon it--that the sensation of hunger is designed to provide the body with food, that sexual stimulation is meant to ensure physical reproduction. When the body dies, they assert, the soul dies with it. The Spirit they regard as a meaningless, mystical superstition. According to the Marxist, materialistic philosophy, there is no such a thing as a spiritual, immortal life beyond the mortal life of this world. This life is all there is, with nothing before or after: we consist of nothing apart from our bodies. Consequently, individuals may be regarded as nuts and bolts in the social machine and, if they do not serve their purpose, they may be sacrificed. Society is believed to be the immortal reality, the individual as a dispensable entity whose value rests in what it does for society.

I believe that this view requires careful examination.

Is it true that we consist of nothing beyond our bodies, that the whole world is pure matter?

They tell us that in the beginning was matter which developed into man, that tomorrow this man will die and the play have its final curtain! As simple as that! These are objective facts, they argue. Let us be objective then, and the body is a very objective thing which may be studied, examined and dissected. Unfortunately for them, they resort to oversimplification even if facts are distorted in the process. They wouldn't do so much as look under their own skin, that is inside themselves. If you tell them that the body is not the whole man, that inside it a soul exists which is not an objective fact but is, by definition, subjective, and that for each man the object is accompanied by a subject, they will answer with the following question--what is that subjective entity which you call a self or a soul? It is, isn't it, the sum total of physical desires--hunger, fear, sex and the sensory mechanisms of the body which, being physical appendages, must be regarded as equally objective?

Now my answer will begin by a simpler question: Objective to whom? Are we to believe that these 'appendages' are **objective** because they are perceived by **other** people? But are they perceived at all? Other people in fact assume their existence by interpreting behaviouristic phenomena--which can be misleading. Don't we dissemble? Don't we continually resort to play-acting to the extent that our outward behaviour rarely ever reflects our real thoughts and feelings?

No, the criterion of **other** people is not watertight!

Well, perhaps these appendages are objective as viewed by the individual himself? They are, in other words, an object as viewed by the subject.

But how can you treat your **self** as an object? If you do, it will grow cold. Under the sharp strokes of analytic lancets the self will turn into a corpse; the soul will run away. The soul

cannot be removed for microscopic scrutiny as a tree leaf may. Its essence is its subjectivity: its reality consists in its being the other side of the coin. **It is the subject insofar as the body is the object.** Subject and object being the two poles of reality, to define matter as objective is to admit the existence of something other than matter, namely the soul.

We cannot accept, in the light of this, the materialistic definition of self and soul. They cannot be reduced to mere physical drives--the hunger, sex and fear with which the body recognizes thirst and hunger etc. Nothing can be farther from the truth of man and his soul.

Man does sacrifice his livelihood, his home and his warm bed for targets and ideals which are abstract in the extreme--justice, right and freedom! We hear to this day of 'proletariat workers' who are immolated on their guns, in Vietnam and elsewhere, in defence of a nebulous cause--an unrealizable morrow! Are we to equate the ideals of justice and freedom with hunger and sex? Are we to assume that the workers sacrifice themselves **because** they are driven by those physical needs alone? Should we not assume, rather, that there is another entity which dictates such a course of action? Rather than the 'physical needs reflected in an inner mirror' the soul is a transcendent reality; it exists beyond and above the body; it is the colossal power which sacrifices the body but is never subservient to it!

If you were to be equated solely with your body, you'd be hard put to it to explain how you control and subject that body. If you merely were your hunger, you would not be able to control that hunger. The simple fact that you have an inner power capable of controlling your physical life and your 'instincts' means that you have within you a distinctly different 'element' which we call the self.

– With your soul you control your body
– With your mind you ocontrol your soul
– With your insight you control your mind.

This differentiation between one mode of existence and another, between an existent and a super-existent that controls it, is the actual proof of the existence of the spirit as a transcendent reality, as a power independent of the body but which controls it. The spirit is not dependent on, nor does it die with, the body.

He who claims that a man is merely a combination of physiological (material) functions must expalin to us where that man goes at the moment he sinks to sleep. All physiological functions continue during sleep, and so do all the reflexes. If you prick the hand of the sleeping man with a pin it will immediately react away from you; the heart continues to beat; breathing is regular; gland secretions do not cease; the movement of the bowels goes on; and the genitals respond to stimulation. Yet what we have now is a sleeping man who may be compared to a tree or an animal; he has primitive life which is as close as could be to insect life. Where is the **real** man?

The cycle of sleep and wakefulness is a miniature of life's bigger cycle of death and resurrection. It reveals the existence of that transcendent element which, once back in wakefulness, could restore to the outstretched body--suddenly and without preliminaries--a Hitler, a Nero or a Caligula. Such an apparently lifeless body now wakes up to kill, invade and destroy! We cannot, can we, explain the astounding difference between the two conditions in terms of materialistic changes occurring in a split second?

Now the Quran plausibly explains what happens. The Quran tells us that the spirit leaves the body in sleep, just as happens in death, then comes back in wakefulness:

> It is God that takes the souls of men at death: and those who die not he takes during their sleep: those on whom he has passed a decree of death he keeps back (from returning to life) but the rest he sends to their bodies for a term appointed.
>
> **The Companies,** 42

The Quran is full of verses which decisively establish the reality of Resurrection--of life after death:

> And God caused you to grow out of the earth then he shall return you into it, and bring you forth.
>
> **Noah,** 17–18

> Surely it is we who bring death to life and write down what they have forwarded and what they have left behind; everything we have numbered in a clear register.
>
> **Ya Seen,** 12

> And the Trumpet shall be blown; then behold, they are sliding down from their tombs unto their Lord. They say, 'Alas for us! Who roused us out of our sleeping-place? This is what the All-Merciful promised, and the Envoys spoke truly.' It was only one cry; then behold, they are all arraigned before us.
>
> **Ya Seen,** 51–53

What, did you think that We created you only for sport, and that you would not be returned to Us?

The Believers, 115

abasing their eyes, they shall come forth from the tombs as if they were scattered grasshoppers.

The Moon, 7

And on that day We shall set the mountains in motion, and thou seest the earth coming forth, and We muster them so that We leave not so much as one of them behind; and they shall be presented before thy Lord in ranks-- 'You have come to Us, as We created you upon the first time; nay, you asserted We should not appoint for you a tryst.'

The Cave, 47–48

Now, by thy Lord, We shall surely muster them, and the Satans, then We shall parade them about Gehenna hobbling on their knees.

Mary, 68

To recapitulate: The Spirit is a fact. It is transcendent to the body and secure from mortality. Immortal, it will go back to its Creator on the Day of Resurrection. It was oversimplification on the part of the Marxists that produced their false image of man. In an attempt to find an easy solution to an insuperable problem

they have distorted all facts, claiming that man is no more than his body, that he is made of dust and must go back to dust. I find it difficult to understand how they came to believe such nonsense when the world about us is so perfect, when every particle of existence testifies to the underlying order and beauty of the whole, when the chain of being is accompanied by a chain of causality wherein death serves life, where men sacrifice their lives for the most abstract goals and ideals. Is anything at all done in vain? Does anything at all perish for ever and go to utter waste? How can any one believe that man, the noblest of all God's creatures, will perish for ever and go to utter waste?

> What, did you think that We created you only for sport, and that you would not be returned to Us?
>
> **The Believers,** 115

> What, does man reckon he shall be left to waste, without purpose?
>
> **The Resurrection,** 36

An infidel came to Muhammad with a dead man's bone. He crushed it into powder then asked the Prophet:

– Will your God resuscitate these bones now they are dust?

Revelation came down to Muhammad, some time later, with the following verse:

> And he has struck for us a similitude and forgotten his creation; he says, 'who shall quicken the bones when they are decayed?' Say: 'He shall quicken them, who originated them in every kind of creation.
>
> **Ya Seen,** 78

The Quran here adduces irrefutable proof. You ask how God creates a new life out of decayed bones but you forget that you yourself were created out of nothing--from a drop of water! Surely He who has created you in the first place must be capable of bringing you back to life:

> Is not he, who created the heavens and earth, able to create the like of them? Yes indeed; He is the All-Creator, the All-Knowing.
>
> **Ya Seen,** 81

> What, were We wearied by the first creation? No indeed; but they are in uncertainty as to the new creation.
>
> **Qaf,** 15

To paraphrase, God says that as it was not difficult to create men originally, it cannot be difficult to resurrect them; men should never doubt God's ability to do that:

> as We originated the first Creation, so We shall bring it back again--
>
> **The Prophets,** 104

The story of resurrection is thus, clearly but briefly, told by the Quran. In what I may describe as an exciting verse, God tells us about the rising of the dead after their long sleep in their graves:

> Upon that day when the Hour is come, the sinners shall swear that they have not tarried above an hour;
>
> **The Greeks,** 55

The centuries which the dead have spent in their graves will appear to them on Resurrection as no longer than minutes; they will feel as though they have had an afternoon nap--a siesta after a heavy lunch. To every man Resurrection will appear as taking place immediately after death, because on his death he 'steps out of time and space', being unconscious of the time spent in the grave. It is not therefore an exaggeration to state that for each of us Resurrection is just as far away as the time of death; and it is in this sense very near indeed.

Perhaps this explains the following verse:

> Haply the Hour is nigh;
>
> **The Confederates,** 63

and may equally explain the verse of Resurrection:

> Your creation and your upraising are as but of a single soul.
>
> **Loqman,** 28

The upraising of Alexander the Great from his grave, where he had been dead for two thousand years, and the upraising of the beggar who passed away only yesterday, are like the upraising of a single person: the time spent by both in the grave will be felt by neither. It is as though, therefore, they died on the same day and, now they are resurrected at the same moment, they must feel as a single soul.

Though established fact, the 'spirit' and 'resurrection' are problematic enough and today's readers may require additional philosophical evidence of their existence. So, for the philosophically-minded reader, let me adduce such proof. In dealing with the 'spirit' I am going to rely on the well-known qualities of movement.

As is well-known, movement can only be observed externally. If you are moving at the same pace and within the same orbit as another moving object you will fail to observe its movement. You must step outside the orbit and stand still before you can observe it. Sometimes, you must admit, you cannot tell whether the lift you are inside is moving or still; but you can, can't you, if you look outside it at a fixed platform or landing. The same thing applies to the moving train--and to the sun! You can only see it moving from the outside--from a stationary vantage point on the earth or the moon. You cannot observe the movement of the earth from a position on the earth itself: you have to fly into space before you can do so. In short, you cannot observe a condition wherein you are involved; you have to step outside before you can!

The process of perception is a definite proof of the existence of two things at the same time: the object perceived, and the perceiving subject. Consequently, we would never have been able to perceive the passage of time unless there was a perceiving subject within us capable of stepping outside to observe its movement from a separate platform--something stationary outside the flux of time.

If our perception moved consistently with the hands of the clock as they ticked the seconds away we would never be able to perceive those seconds. Our perception would have moved on with the seconds, elapsing with them, without observing anything.

This is a stunning conclusion which must be pondered thoroughly.

Man's reality is twofold. The first part is immersed in time; it elapses with time, gets older and feebler everyday and dies in the end (the body). The other part lives outside time, observing

it from a stationary platform without ever getting involved in it; it never ages, never weakens, never elapses. When the body falls prey to time and is reduced to dust, the other part still remains outside time, that is, alive. We can find no better name for this 'other' part than the one established by religions, namely the Spirit.

Every one of us can feel that living entity within himself. Every one can realize that it is different **in kind** from external entities which change continually. Every man can feel that he has inside him a condition of Being--call it presence, duration or permanence--which is completely different from time-controlled material existence. The inner mental state which I have called a 'condition of Presence' is the key to the spiritual Being within; it unravels the mystery which is called the 'spirit', the 'absolute',the 'ultimate'.

Our aesthetic and moral sense is a case in point. When we perceive beauty, an act of righteousness or justice we actually distinguish them from ugliness, wrong-doing and iniquity respectively, using a criterion which is independent of all these things. To have a sense of discrimination is to be able to take a position on our 'spiritual platform'.

The existence of the spirit can therefore be proved by the existence of the conscience, of the aesthetic sense, and that mysterious faculty with which we distinguish right from wrong, the false from the real--the moral sense.

Is this platform to remain outside time for ever? Perhaps it belongs to a different time scale wherein a day can be as long as a thousand years? The Quran says, 'and surely a day with thy Lord is as a thousand years of your counting' **(The Pilgrimage, 47)** Exegetes have been in conflict over the exact meaning of God's days; they are impossible to understand. They are mostly

symbolic and oblique indicators; we cannot expect them to give us a direct clue to the nature of the spirit--one of the most difficult questions to be encountered. However, all we can do--but we must do it--is to establish the existence of the spirit.

Can the spirit reside in the aesthetic sense planted in us by God as proof of his consummate workmanship? It may be a spark of his Spirit, for ever alive in us since he breathed his spirit into us; it may be a holy flame derived from his light, a ray from his eternal sun? Trying to fathom the depth of that mystery man is made only too conscious of the 'sad incompetence of human speech'.

We would not be far wrong if we defined the spirit within us as our freedom--an inner inveterate freedom **living** in the deeper recesses of the soul. The Creator wants it to be absolutely 'immune' to external influences; he has established it as a holy of holies--a sanctum which none but the individual himself can approach.

In the depth of the inner self each man has freedom of choice, and free will. It is there that our aesthetic and moral sense resides--we can freely appreciate, judge and discriminate. And it is on account of this freedom that God has given us the earth and made us even as little kings, to rule it. It is a kind of test or trial--a rehearsal--after which come the questioning and the reckoning. In the light of the result of that test a 'rearrangement' will take place, so that each one is put in the rank he has earned. We shall be called to account for the contents of that area--the inner self, the sanctum. A Prophet's tradition says:

> Works are judged by the intentions behind them; each man will be credited with his intentions.

The area of intention, of secret thought and feeling, is the area observed and known only to God; his reckoning will be based on the contents of that area because, as has been mentioned, it is the area of absolute freedom. The obstacles which restrict man's freedom do not arise until man has begun to take physical action. Freedoms of individuals will then clash--with one another, and with the environment, and with society. Divine Will intervenes here to limit the scope of evil and open up possibilities for righteousness. God's mercy now comes into play to lessen the harm men do to one another and to provide each man with powers compatible with his intentions.

To state that God has created a spirit for me is to state that he has created me as a **freedom**, that is, as a distinct individual. The two statements explain one another, and each conveys facts which are invisible, intangible and inexpressible. Where the spirit is concerned all experssion breaks down, in fact; language can provide us with no more than 'hints' or imprecise symbols. For here we stand on a platform outside time, outside everything that is tangible or visible:

> They will question thee concerning the Spirit. Say: 'The spirit is of the bidding of my Lord. You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little.'
>
> **The Night Journey,** 85

The spirit goes to its appointed destination after death: it will be separated from us by the **Barzakh** (isthmus, barrier) until the Day of Resurrection. To the materialists of all schools, let us say what the Quran asks us to say:

> And say to the unbelievers: 'Act you according to your station; we are acting.

> And watch and wait; we are also watching and waiting.' To God belongs the Unseen in the heavens and the earth. To him the whole matter shall be returned.
>
> **Hood,** 121–3

The Spirit is an Unseen.

What happens after death is an Unseen.

All we have to offer is the tiding brought forth by our noble Prophet from the Knower of the Unseen--he who sees what we see not, who knows what we know not.

Chapter XII

No Clergy

The Quran is definite and decisive in abolishing all forms of clergy and clerical mediation. It states in many verses, clearly and unequivocally, that man has a direct contact with God, that God manages the affairs of his creatures directly--without a 'board of directors', a 'Secretariat' or intermediaries:

> Say: 'to God belongs intercession altogether.'
>
> **The Companies,** 44

> And when my servants question thee concerning Me I am near to answer the call of my caller, when he calls to Me--
>
> **The Cow,** 186

> and we have not appointed thee a watcher over them, neither art thou their guardian.
>
> **Cattle,** 107

> Surely thy Lord knows very well those who have gone astray from his way, and he knows very well those who are guided.
>
> **The Bee,** 125

> He chastises whom he will, and forgives whom he will;
>
> **The Table,** 40

> Say: 'Call on those you have asserted apart from God; they possess not so much as the weight of an ant in the heavens nor in the earth;
>
> **Sheba,** 22

God even says to His Prophet:

> Ask pardon for them, or ask not pardon for them, if thou askest pardon for them seventy times, God will not pardon them; that, because they disbelieved in God and his Messenger.
>
> **Repentance,** 80

Notwithstanding his high rank, his 'nearness' to, and special relationship with God, a prophet cannot alter a divine judgment. Naturally no ordinary mortal can. It would not really matter if that 'mortal' was an **Imam,** a religious scholar or even a saint. 'To God belongs all intercession' and no mortal can intercede on behalf of another except with God's permission.

Islamic history has never known Indulgences (or excommunication) on any account. 'Thy Lord', God tells the Prophet, 'knows very well those who have gone astray from his way, and he knows very well those who are guided.' No one can see what a man has in his heart of hearts except God. Consequently, Islamic scholars were never allowed to acquire temporal power or develop into a Clergy: they never had any tutelage over people's destinies.

Similarly, rituals are, according to the Quran, simple indeed. There are five prayers a day--in the morning, at noon in the afternoon, at sunset and after dusk. The regularity is meant to ensure that the believers are constantly mindful of God's presence and so capable of averting evil. Again the physical rituals are simple: washing with water (for cleanliness and purification), bowing and kneeling down, to defeat a mortal's pride and remind him of his position vis-á-vis his Creator. This is a kind of psycological and physical exercise; it is also spiritual education. There are more complex (and harder) exercises in modern Yoga, very much in vogue among the intellectuals these days. They compete in performing them willingly.

For all the simplicity of the rituals, the Quran has allowed them to be curtailed in case of hardship. The rites of ablution may be replaced by a simple symbolic act of 'washing' the face and the hands with clean sand (or dust). A man may perform his prayers sitting or lying down; he may close his eyes to imply bowing or kneeling down. The verses used at prayer may be recited 'silently' in case of illness. Indeed the whole prayer may be a simple **reminder** in one's heart, without any rituals at all. Any place on earth is a mosque.

> Whithersoever you turn, there is the
> face of God.
>
> **Thc Cow,** 115

Prayer (Arabic **Salah**) is a link **(Silah)** or communion. God has commanded it for the good of mankind not for exercising his divine power: he is All-Sufficient; it is we who need him. Prayer is our means of imbibing life, just like the sunflower imbibes life by facing the sun. By directing our faces to the source of our power--our Creator--we receive life, light and inspiration.

Fasting is a spiritual exercise. It is a means of defeating physical desires, of controlling the animal side of man. Fasting is prescribed in all kinds of mystical exercises--Hindu, Christian or Buddhist. There are various forms of fasting: complete abstinence; taking in nothing but water; having a vegetarian diet; the exclusion of all animal foods; or, as in Islam, total fasting for a limited period every day, between dawn and sunset. Islamic fasting is the simplest.

Fasting trains the soul to endure unpleasantness and resist temptation--the basis of the ethical law. So, even if God had not ordained fasting, we would have ordained it ourselves. It is a spiritual exercise, and we need it for the development of will power, patience and perseverance--much as our muscles need the physical exercise of swimming, rowing, gymnastics and football!

God allows this ordinance to be lifted in case of physical incapacity, of illness or hardship. You redeem yourself, if you do not fast, by feeding the poor.

The noises made and the vociferous attacks on the Quranic penalty amputating the hand of the thief are really baseless. In a world of murderers you need an effective deterrent to avert bloodshed; and in a world of robbers the amputation of the hand is a good deterrent. Carry it out once or twice and the endless flow of thefts will stop. Even so, Islamic Law has established certain conditions and controls for carrying out this penalty.

According to Islamic Law this penalty is suspended if a man steals to feed himself or if he is in dire need, even if the theft is premeditated. The penalty is applicable, rightly, to those who steal not through compulsion but because of covetousness and greed--that is, the professionals! If a thief proves, however, to be mentally deficient or unbalanced, he must be committed for treatment in an asylum.

In the Soviet Union the law stipulates that the penalty of death be applied to any man who steals or embezzles public money. And reports of such trials are published in the official press.

The Bible advises man to cut off his hand if it offends:

> So if your right eye causes you to sin, take it out and throw it away!.. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away! It is much better for you to lose one of your limbs than for your whole body to go to hell.
>
> **Matthew,** 5–29, 30

The Quran shows more mercy by commanding no more than the amputation of the hand.

The orientalists' criticism of the Quran because of its attitude to slavery is equally baseless. The social conditions of the Arabs in pre-Islamic times precluded the freeing of all slaves at once. A revealed legislation, the Quran could not have decreed it for fear of utter chaos: thousands of beggars would have been on the streets, deprived of livelihood and lacking in training for a useful trade. It would have been a catastrophe, not a solution. As given by the Quran, the solution was to phase out slavery. To begin with, no more slaves were to be had: as the only source of slaves was the captives of war the Quran commanded they be released (i.e. freed) or ransomed:

> then set them free, either by grace or ransom
>
> **Muhammad,** 4

No more captives would be in bondage. As for the slaves already there, they should be freed gradually; God made the freeing of a slave an established redemption for all sins, both great and small. To free a slave was made a test of man's ability to liberate his soul:

> But he hath made no haste on the path that is steep; and what will explain to thee the path that is steep? It is freeing the bondman;
>
> **The City,** 11–13

You liberate your soul by breaking the shackles it has when it has someons else in bondage; you attain freedom by freeing others. In this way you 'haste on the path that is steep'--that is, you surmount the biggest hurdle within you by conquering your own desires. Can there be a bigger hurdle than one's own self?

The Quran thus put a stopper on the source of slaves, and opened the way for the freeing of all already in bondage.

What happened in the days of the Umayyads was, however, the reverse. Could it be blamed on the Quran? Certaintly not. Theirs was a corrupt regime; the palaces of the Caliphs, aping the Persian Empire, turned into dens of sensual pleasures.

The Quran emphasizes in letter and spirit the brotherhood of all men, whatever their differences in colour or race:

> Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women;
>
> **Women,** 1

> Mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most god-fearing of you.
>
> **Apartments,** 13

> and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God.
>
> **The House of Imran,** 64

Compared with what the Torah and the Gospel have to say about slaves, the Quran must be regarded as a document for the abolition of slavery. St. Peter commands slaves to obey their masters, stating that slavery is a redemption for men and is designed to absolve them of the sins committed against the Lord. In his letter to the Ephesians St. Paul says:

> Slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling; and do it with a sincere heart, as though you were serving Christ.
>
> 5–6

The Torah commands the Jews explicitly to enslave all nations other than the Israelites. In the Torah when a city surrendered to the Jews without a fight all the population were taken captive; both men and women became the slaves and slave-girls of the conquerors.

The Quran is in fact the only holy book which commands the freeing of slaves. The Quran commands that no man shall

enslave another by appointing himself as Lord and master over him, that all people constitute one family descended from one father, that no one may rise above another except by virtue of godfearing.

The truth is that slavery as practised by the Arabs could never be compared with the grosser kind ofhuman bondage established by the Europeans: a whole people were reduced to slaves in Nazi Germany under Hitler. This is the more heinous, of course, because it happened in Europe and in the Twentieth Century.

* * *

Now true religion according to the Quran is a combination of faith, high morality and good works. The emphasis on morality and ethical codes is everywhere to be found in the Quran; there are endless examples:

> God commands you to deliver trusts back to their owners; and when you judge between the people, that you judge with justice.
>
> **Women,** 58

> O believers, be the securers of justice, witnesses for God. Let not detestation for a people move you not to be equitable; be equitable--that is nearer to godfearing.
>
> **The Table,** 8

> And apporach not fornication; surely it is an indecency, and evil as a way.
>
> **The Night Journey,** 32

and do not quarrel with one another, and so lose heart, and your power depart.

The Spoils, 46

Call thou to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good admonition, and dispute with them in the better way.

The Bee, 125

O believers, if an ungodly man comes to you with a tiding, make clear, lest you afflict a people unwittingly, and then repent of what you have done.

Apartments, 6

Surely those who cast it up on women in wedlock that are heedless but believing shall be accursed in the present world and the world to come.

Light, 23

O believers, let not any people scoff at another people, who may be better than they; neither let women scoff at women, who may be better than themselves. And find not fault with one another, neither revile one another by nicknames. An evil name is ungodliness after belief.

Apartments, 11

O believers, do not enter houses other than your houses until you first ask leave and salute the people thereof;

Light, 27

And fulfil the covenant; surely the covenant shall be questioned of.

The Night Journey, 34

O believers, eschew much suspicion; some suspicion is a sin. And do not spy, neither backbite one another; would any of you like to eat the flesh of his brother dead? You would abominate it.

Apartments, 12

and if any of the idolaters seeks of thee protection, grant him protection till he hears the words of God; then do thou convey him to his place of security.

Repentance, 6

Regarding the ethics of, and code of conduct in war the Quran gives us the best rules:

O believers, when you encounter the unbelievers marching to battle, turn not your backs to them.

The Spoils, 15

God loves those who fight in His way in ranks, as though they were a building well-compacted.

The Ranks, 4

If there be twenty of you, patient men, they will overcome two hundred; if there be a hurdred of you, they will overcome a thousand unbelievers, for they are a people who understand not.

The Spoils, 56

Say: 'Flight will not profit you, if you flee from death or slaying; you will be given enjoyment of days then but little.'

The Confederates, 16

Say: 'Who is he that shall defend you from God, if He desires evil for you, or desires mercy for you?

The Confederates, 17

Say: 'Surely death, from which you flee, shall encounter you; then you shall be returned to the Knower of the Unseen and the Visible and He will tell you that you have been doing.

Congregation, 8

On betrayal the Quran says:

God has struck a similitude for the unbelievers--the wife of Noah, and the

wife of Lot; for they were under two of Our righteous servants, but they betrayed them, so they availed them nothing whatsoever against God; so it was said, 'Enter, you two, the fire with those who enter.'

The Forbidding, 10

On hypocrisy:

O you who believe, wherefore do you say what you do not? Very hateful is it to God, that you say what you do not.

The Ranks, 2–3

Surely the hypocrites will be in the lowest reach of the Fire; thou will not find for them any helper.

Women, 145

The hypocrites, the men and the women, are as one another; they bid to dishonour, and forbid honour; they keep their hands shut; they have forgotten God, and He has forgotten them. The hypocrites--they are the ungodly.

Repentance, 67

On thrift:

You will not attain piety until you expend of what you love;

The House of Imran, 92

preferring others above themselves, even though poverty be their portion.

The Mustering, 9

And keep not thy hand chained to thy neck, nor outspread it widespread altogether; or thou wilt sit reproached and denuded.

The Night Journey, 29

On conceit, humility and kindness:

Surely God loves not the proud and boastful.

Women, 36

and lower to them the wing of humbleness out of mercy and say, 'my Lord, have mercy upon them, as they have raised me up when I was little.'

The Night Journey, 24

On forgiveness:

But let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish that God should forgive you?

Light, 22

Counter thou the evil with that which is fairer.

The Believers, 96

> But surely he who bears patiently and is forgiving--surely that is true constancy.
>
> **Counsel,** 43

In a single comprehensive verse these teachings are summed up:

> It is not piety, that you turn your faces to the East and to West. True piety is this: To believe in God, and the Last Day, the Angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to kinsmen, and orphans, the needy, the traveller, the beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay the alms. And they who fulfil their covenant when they have engaged in a covenant, and endure with fortitude misfortune, hardship and peril, these are they who are true in their faith, these are the truly godfearing.
>
> **The Cow,** 177

There can be no end to examples; the Quran is indeed an ethical document.

Someone may object, 'We don't need a Quran to have good character! An Englishman, far away in London, is an example of such good character without having read the Quran, or the Bible, and without believing, in fact, in any religion whatsoever!'

To raise such an objection is to fail to distinguish between two kinds of 'good character'. The first is closer to 'social

intelligence' and masquerades as 'good manners'. An example: an intelligent grocer discovers that good manners is good for business, so that it is in itself good business! He discovers that it helps him to win over a customer, heart and pocket, and so offers love to cash in love! This species of good character is 'manufactured' by a sharp opportunist mind. A father implants it in his children in the form of good habits needed to make new friends and succeed in business. From beginning to end it betrays a keen interest in this world and a desire to perfect the means of possessing it!

The other kind of morality, taught by religion, is completely different, if not indeed the opposite. A religious person believes that the world is an ephemeral business which is not worthy to be cherished; to love and meet God is his prime target at all times. He offers love, genuine love, to everybody but expects nothing in return. He generously contributes to life--in terms of money, time and physical effort--without consideration of profit. He does it simply beacuse of his firm belief that whatever is given away is insignificant, because it is ephemeral. He does not care if this world slips through his fingers because he has his eyes set on the other. His main interest is to win the Creator, not his creatures.

A religious man is therefore capable of loving his enemy; he could even offer him advice and assistance. He can give away that which he needs; he can be charitable, however poor, and feed the hungry even when in need of the food himself. In making a contribution he feels that the credit goes to God's will not to his own. In other words he disclaims all credit for good works by attributing it all to God's kindness. This is what I would really call 'good character' or good manners.

In this sense only a believer can have good character.

A materialist, or atheist, can never have such character; he may at best be well behaved. He may possess good manners owing to his social intelligence and his knowledge of the laws of profit and loss. He loves rationally and for a purpose. When he gives something away he gives himself the credit because he does not believe in the existence of a Divine Power outside himself.

If a professed materialist can experience genuine, spiritual love; if he can give away for the sake of giving away, believing that he is not doing it for himself and therefore expecting no worldy gain from it, he must be, though without knowing it himself, a religious man deep down. He is the victim of self-delusion. One day he must, I believe, come to realize his true belonging and cast off his materialist mask. The heart is always the right indicator; it is the heart that will reveal one's true position--believer or materialist. Many are those who, formally religious, pray and fast, while their hearts are 'dry as summer dust', their spirits as hard as stone. Their claim to religion goes no further than the formal statement in their birth certificates.

On the other hand, there is many a man with a Marxist Intellectual card pinned to his lapel while in his heart he is utterly divorced from materialist thought and rationality. In spirit he will be found to harbour the purest sentiments imaginable as a true Christian or a devout Muslim. He may have made a mistake in classifying himself. Perhaps he had unwittingly dressed himself in a modernist garb just to be fashionable!

Self-knowledge is often hard. Sometimes a man cannot discover the truth without a struggle--without suffering. The 'straight path' of which God tells us in the Quran may refer to the path of suffering, that is, to man's attempt to recognize his true self and hence direct it to its creator. It is the path taken in every journey to God--from dust to the source of right and light.

The beautiful words of the Quran are the best guide to that path.

Chapter XIII

No god but God

'There is no god but God' means that nothing really exists except God. You and I are merely images that momentarily flash on the screen of existence--images on a television screen which disappear when the power is cut! When the power comes back, other images will appear only to vanish in their turn. Time, in terms of specific ages, is like that: the green vernal leaves wilt away in time and fall out, and the dead leaves are heaped like corpses in piles of dust. The following lines of Arabic verse are apt:

> There is many a tomb which, many
> times a tomb,
> Has laughed at the crowding, though
> parting, opposites;
> Down centuries long and ages of doom
> The relics of corpses receiving corpses--
> How dust now claims all inmates!

The very face of the earth will, over millions of years, be composed of our ancestors' bodies:

> Tread lightly! Methinks the face of the
> earth
> Is made up of our own bodies.

Under a heap of dust diggers manage to salvage a **kohl** phial. An archeologist eyes it with interest. 'Yes, it belongs to **Sit al-Mulk**, sister of **al-Hakim Bi-Amrillah** (a Fatimid ruler of

Egypt). It is 900 years old. There's still some **kohl** inside.' Where is **Sit al-Mulk**? Where is that age of hers? You could in your mind's eye see her ladies-in-attendance, her hairdressers and maids of honour; you could hear the soft steps of the slave girls, and sounds of sabre-rattling in the distance; a call for prayer and horses neighing. The palace Agha (herald) announces the arrival of an envoy from Qadish. **Al-Hakim** himself appears, amidst an impressive array of followers and servants.

Where is all this?

Under a heap of dust. It's over. It's become dust itself. It was a dream in time's own mind. Tomorrow you and I will go under the heap of dust. Our age will be reduced to a line, a single line in a nook, a dream in the mind of a historian. Diggers will discover your cigarette packet under the dust and the archeologists will reconstruct your story--a prince who was poisoned by tobacco.

The truth will be lost--the facts and their authors!

Death will devour all--the actor, the audience, the critics and the truth. The only truth that will remain is necessarily the immortal truth--the One Living Eternal Presence.

Thou art dead; and they are dead.

The Companies, 30

Wake up to reality. You do not exist! You are but a shadow and, shadow-like, you exist for as long as the Sun is up in the sky! Once set, you'll disappear together with all the shadows that had stretched out by your side! Your existence is derivative: it is therefore unreal. You live on 'a supply from God' so that if the supply is held up, you will cease to exist.

God exists independently of everything else. He is All-Sufficient, the only existing reality, and therefore, there is no god but He.

Everything has its source in Him, and goes back to Him. He is the only everlasting reality; everything else is a passing shadow. God sends down revelation to Muhammad:

> Know thou therefore that there is no god but God and ask forgiveness for thy sin.
>
> **Muhammad,** 19

> He sends down the angels with the Spirit of His command upon whomsoever He will among His servants, saying: 'Give you warning that there is no God but I so fear Me!'
>
> **The Bee,** 2

It is the first and most important tiding from heaven--

> there is no god but God--

and is, therefore, the heart of the Quran, the heart of Islam, and the heart of all creeds. Hence the Prophet's tradition:

> 'The best message that I and all the prophets before me have conveyed is that there is no god but God.'

It is the 'word of godfearing':

> then God sent down His tranquillity upon His Messenger and the believers, and fastened to them the world of godfearing to which they have better right and are worthy of; and God has knowledge of everything.
>
> **Victory,** 26

The 'word of godfearing' meant is the statement 'there is no god but God'.

It is the angels' incantation in the Higher Assembly, as they sing the glories of God.

It is the 'testimony' which Muslims recite a dozen times a day at prayer. It is the 'word of salvation' uttered by the happy man in the throes of death before giving up the ghost.

It is a word of warning: everything will perish. This world is but a designer's set, a house of cards, a toy city. It is doomed, will be dismantled and repacked.

If made a Constitution for life these words are capable of charting out a better, truer and more honest life wherein nothing counts apart from eternal values--the values established by the Creator.

There is no god but God: we can worship none, therefore, but God. We are not going to worship one another; we are not going to have gods from among ourselves. Nothing will make us fight one another because nothing, we now know, really exists.

We shall not be vain, knowing that we are merely shadows playing on the face of the water. We shall not be overjoyed by wealth or oversaddened by poverty. We shall not hesitate to make sacrifices or be horrified by disasters, knowing that they are but transitory conditions.

This fact alone inspire us to endure the severest pains, for, like pleasures, pains are transient.

We shall not be afraid; how can a 'dead' man fear death?

We shall not fear one another, when each one of us knows that he is no more than a scarecrow, designed to drive away the sparrows?

We shall love and give away in humility.

We shall resist and fight bravely.

We shall receive our laurels in shyness, and in shyness listen to the words of praise. We shall have infinite fortitude and make endless sacrifices. We shall not fear war, the bomb, microbes or illness, because we know that the source is One, that they all come from God and are merely the instruments of enacting His Will. A microbe cannot in itself be harmful, for both harm and benefit come from God and it is God that designs and determines all. It is God who created the scorpion, the poison and the rose; it is He who spreads the fragrance in the air, the poison in the veins. He is the giver of life and death. His pre-ordination cannot be altered and His command cannot be modified. He is the only doer and we are only His means.

Our hearts will be filled with tranquillity, peace and security, knowing that their sustenance derives from the Living God, the Immortal.

When a man believes in God as the Ultimate and Omnipotent, he will of necessity rely on God's help and repose his trust in Him. This reliance or trust **(tawakkul)** is a positive quality; it must be distinguished from the negative **tawaakul.**

Positive trust in God **(tawakkul)** means that a man must have the needed resolve to accomplish a given task before undertaking it. He must do his best, believing that the ultimate result will be determined by God. He must make the necessary effort, though the success or failure of that effort, he believes, is preordained:

> and when thou art resolved, put thy
> trust in God.
>
> **The House of Imran,** 159

A **mutawakkil**, that is, a man who puts his trust in God, differs from the proud man in that the former denies himself any intrinsic power; he fulfils his task but ascribes his success to God's will not to his own ability. He regards his success as a help from God not a personal achievement. The work of his own hands, he knows, is only one of the instruments employed by God to secure success.

On the other hand, the proud man thinks that his achievements are solely due to his intelligence, efforts and cleverness. He cannot conceive of any other will than his own at work whether within his personal life or in the universe.

Now a **mutawaakil,** a man who passively relies on God, differs from both. He lacks will power and resolve and, without lifting a finger, expects God to do everything for him. He is like the Jews who, when Moses called on them to fight, answered:

> Go forth, thou and thy Lord, and do
> battle; we will be sitting here.
>
> **The Table,** 24

While the **mutawakkil** puts his trust in himself and in God, the passive **mutawaakil** does not trust himself nor believe in the order established by God--an order wherein the chain of causes and effects is the basic pillar. Nothing can be achieved, according to that order, without the necessary resolve and effort.

An example of the positive **mutawakkil** is the man who, having decided to leave for Alexandria, books himself a ticket, reserves a seat, promptly does his packing, and catches the train on time. Once in his seat, he leaves the rest to the driver. He puts his trust in the driver's ability and the laws governing the

motion of the locomotive. He is so assured and so 'trusting' in fact that he now goes to sleep. If he behaves differently--if he runs in panic, for instance, to the driver to make sure that he drives well--he will be regarded as a fool. He would be meddling in other people's affairs.

The world is like that train, we the travellers. We try to get ourselves the best seats, but trust the driver and the laws of motion. We trust in God, cleverer than any mortal driver, and we trust in His laws which we know, from our observation of the universe, to be perfect.

As we work hard, sparing no effort in trying to ensure success, our hearts are warmed up by such trust. Our souls will enjoy the tranquillity of trust and our minds will be assured that justice will take its course, that each one of us will get what he deserves. Consequently we are never saddened by failure, never vain in success. If we panicked or were distressed by any untoward occurrences (which are in reality preordained) we would be displaying a lack of trust in the ability of the driver.

The passively dependent **mutawaakil** is a different kind of traveller. He thinks of travel but lacks the necessary resolve: he neither books a ticket nor does his packing. He tells you he believes in God, that he relies on God, and that God will consequently send him the tickets from heaven, perhaps, or send someone along to give him a free lift. This kind of man will end up, of course, where he is. He will blame his failure on God, or will tell you that it is God's will and that he therefore accepts it because he is a believer. His actions do not, however, show any real belief; for to believe in God is to believe in the order established by God in this world--the order of cause and effect--wherein resolve and effort constitute the necessary means of fulfilling any task. God has commanded us most emphatically to work:

> Say: 'Work; and God will surely see
> your work,
>
> **Repentance,** 105

To be a true **mutawakkil** is to attain a high rank indeed. Only a devout believer (not to say a mystic) is capable of it; for the point of departure is the belief that there is no god but God, that there is no omnipotent except God.

A true **mutawakkil** trusts in God, loves God, and loves God's order. He accepts the responsibilities and the burdens established by God as prerequisites for success. He shirks no duty, and does his utmost, but surrenders himself all the while to God's will. He does not care whether his effort will succeed or not because he is sure that in the end he will get what he deserves. He knows that God is the Fair Judge who does injustice to nobody. When he succeeds he resists the vanity of success; he denies that it was due to his power. He says in humility: 'I could not have done this unless God had wanted it; God had provided the necessary means of attaining my target--the means being both me and my work. Praise be to God!' If he fails, he would not change heart, show any regret or cry over defeat. He would say confidently, 'God has given me what is right for me.'

> Yet it may happen that you will hate a
> thing which is better for you; and it
> may happen that you will love a thing
> which is worse for you; God knows and
> you know not.
>
> **The Cow,** 216

He remembers--he reminds himself all the time--that he does not know, that God alone knows, and that, consequently, he

should not object to God's will. He always returns to God, trusting in Him even as he does his best to achieve success; believing this to be the law of God.

For him, 'there is no god but God' is not a group of words nicely put together but a way of life and a 'law of heart'.

It has become his guide, the only light in the dark world about him. He therefore denies at every step any intrinsic power, believing all power to come from God. As nothing really exists apart from God, there can be no power apart from His.

Such is true piety.

It has been suggested that 'there is no god but God' is the 'word of godfearing' because it makes you really and truly godfearing. He who says it and assimilates its meaning in his heart and mind, so that it becomes the beacon lighting his way, will have captured the true spirit of religion.

In a **Qudsi verse** God says:

> **There is no god but God** is my bastion. He who says it is admitted; and he who is admitted will be secure from my chastisement.

It is the opening statement in all incantations. Before singing the glories of God, the mystics start by uttering it, being the means of establishing God's real existence, that is, that He alone exists in reality while all other phenomena are illusions, sense delusions.

He is the Living, the Everlasting; He gives life to all, takes his life from none.

He is the light with which we see things; the light of the eye, the light of the heart and the mind.

He is the Truth; all else is untruth.

He is the Transcendent; He fills up the earth and the heavens but transcends them; He is never defined in terms of space and time.

He is the infinitely powerful, infinitely present.

He is the only one to whom you could turn for succour; you could turn to none else.

Glory be to Him; hallowed be His name; glory be to the Being that rises above description.

Like Him there is naught in heaven or in earth.

The eyes attain Him not, but He attains the eyes.

He has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one.

Too great is God to have a spouse or offspring.

How can He be in need of offspring when He is the Creator and Maker of all beings? He is the All-Sufficient, the Almighty, the Omnipotent, Who rules each and all.

He originates Creation, then brings it back again, using a single word of command. The sea would be spent before the words of my Lord are spent.

He is veiled from us by being too effulgent; He is not to be seen because He is only too present; He is hidden by being too conspicuous.

The beginning is in Him; the return is to Him.

There can be no peace except in His company, no tranquillity except in His Being.

He is our Lord and Master; He encompasses everything in Knowledge and Mercy.

We have failed to appreciate His power; we cannot do it even if we tried. How could we praise Him rightly when we know so little of His work, His knowledge or His Creation? We can hardly aspire to do so. And that is why He has praised Himself in **al-Fatihah**, the opening chapter of His Book, "Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being".

He is All-Praiseworthy because He alone exists in truth, while we are the evidence of His generosity. He alone is capable of praise because He alone knows the hidden fruits of His creative power. What we see is merely a single atom--the earth moving about in heavens without horizons.

So it is this form of praise that is accepted by the All-Gentle, the All-Generous. We whisper it at the beginning of every prayer--'Praise belongs to God, Lord of all Being'.

He teaches us that He created the world in His Name the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate, not in His Name the Omnipotent, the All-Compeller. In other words He created the world with mercy, with absolute mercy (All-Merciful implies showing absolute mercy to all creatures, those who deserve it and those who do not). We start everything we do by saying 'In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate' because it was in His name as All-Merciful, All-Compassionate, that creation started. Everything came into being through mercy not compulsion.

He made mercy a quality that belongs to Him.

In a **Qudsi Verse** He says:

My mercy comes before my wrath.

The **Fatihah** (opening chapter of the Quran) has the epithets 'All-Merciful, All-Compassionate' before the 'Master of the Day of Doom', that day being the day of wrath when man will be condemned by the work of his own hands.

'There is no god but God' implies absolute monotheism. In the **Fatihah** there are beautiful verses which direct attention to the One God:

> Thee alone we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour. Guide us in the straight path,
>
> **The Opening,** 5–6

We worship Him alone, ask help from Him because He alone truly exists; and we ask Him to guide our steps to the straight path because He alone is capable of it. The straight path leads to God, to the Truth and Salvation.

The **Fatihah** is a chapter which tells us about God and the path leading to Him in seven brief verses, so eloquent that they sum up the contents of the entire Quran. The Quran is essentially a book which tells us about God, the Hereafter and the path leading to Him.

God in the Quran is an entity with names, epithets and actions. The actions can be seen in God's creation--the heavens, the earth, the living world and the Unseen. Heaven and Hell and the other world are His creation too. According to the Quran, the way to God is through worship, God's law and love. This is the straight path leading to safety. The **Fatihah**, as we have seen, sums us these facts and presents them in seven concordant verses, almost like a symphony with a beautiful divine melody. Our Prophet says that the **Fatihah** is the best chapter of the Quran, that the Verse of the Chair is the Master verse, the **Ya Seen** Chapter is the heart of the Quran.

An intelligent reading of the Quran will reveal that the secret lies in the dictum 'There is no god but God'; it is the seed

which grew into the fruit-laden tree of the whole book. Belief in One God is at the root of our vast information and various branches of knowledge.

Now look at the magnificent Verse of the Chair which opens with the statement of monotheism then proceeds to establish the epithets of the One Eternal Living God:

> God
> There is no God but he, the Living, the Everlasting. Slumber seizes him not, neither sleep; to him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Who is there that shall intercede with him save by his leave? He knows what lies before them and what is after them, and they comprehend not anything of his knowledge save such as he wills. His throne comprises the heavens and earth; the preserving of them opresses him not; he is the All-High, the All-Glorious.
>
> **The Cow,** 255

Many chapters and verses in the Quran start or end or lead to the statement of monotheism. Everything begins with a recognition of the One God, and goes ultimately to it. From rudimentary arithmetic we know that an integer may be divided indefinitely to give us all fractions, numbers and parts thereof; but the Integer that is God gives us all the numbers without being capable of division. Hence the Arabic epithet **Ahad** which is often combined with the Arabic for one **(Wahid)** to mean the Indivisible One. **Ahad** means an integer that cannot be concei-

vably approached in terms of fractions; a whole that does not consist of parts or organs but is always a whole. This explains why one of God's most beautiful names is Peace, **Salaam** (often rendered All-Peaceable, though the Arabic term must now be familiar to non-Arabic speakers).

To attain peace we too must unite--states, nations and sects.

No individual can hope to achieve internal peace until he has realized inner unity through harmony. His desires, his mind, his will and his targets must of course be in harmony; but that is not enough. They should constitute an integer--an indivisible entity--which is only possible through unity with God. Man may be made one with God in a mystical sense, that is, when he puts his feet on the straight path leading to God.

* * *

Numbers and letters are the subject of mystical studies. Each figure has a speical significance, and each letter has a corresponding figure. Some figures are particularly hallowed, such as the figure seven. For seven are the heavens, the earths, the colours of the spectrum, the musical notes and the days of the week. The foetus becomes a fully grown baby in seven months, and the gates of Hell, according to the Quran, are seven, and the verses of the **Fatihah** are seven (Arabic: **al-Mathaani,** that is, the oft-repeated verses).

The letters also have secrets. In Arabic a letter like the hard H (often represented in English with a dot or a dash under the H, but represented in the transliteration of Hebrew by a **ch**) is used in almost all words which connote heat or warmth. Note the Arabic words for love, **Hobb**, for war, **Harb,** for fire, **Hareeq,** for heat, **Haraarah**, for fever, **Humma,** hot (in taste) **Harraaq,** for pungent, **Harreef** etc. This means that the letter

has a meaning in itself, a significance, a peculiarity, regardless of the words in which it is used. The letters given in the opening verses of certain chapters of the Quran must, therefore, have a meaning in themselves. Though we do not know it, they must have a certain significance; and though we cannot unravel it, their mystery is a fact--A.L.M.--T.S.M.--K.H.Y.A.S--H.M.--T.S.--Q.--N.--S. It is a higher study, a lofty branch of knowledge which we may not master until much later. There can be no letter in the Quran that is out of place or expendable; each has a specific function to perform. God is the prime teacher, 'Who taught with the pen, taught man that he knew not' (**The Blood-Clot,** 4–5). He has inspired us with the knowledge of letters and revealed to us some of their mysteries. Of the recording and writing of testimony God says in the Quran:

> and let not any writer refuse to write it
> down as God has taught him
>
> **The Cow,** 282

and, in the same chapter, 'fear God; God teaches you'. God is the real teacher. Schools and universities, libraries and laboratories, are but God's instruments of knowledge. As God has given us a soul capable of learning, a perceptive mind and a retentive memory, he has provided us with the means of learning, the letters and the words, as well as the capacity for grasping their right meaning. The words for mother are similar in all languages--**omm,** maman, mummy, in Arabic, French and English respectively. The same phoneme will be found to exist in languages not even distantly related (It is **muma** in the language of the African tribe of Niam-Niam). The words for father are also similar--Arabic **abbee,** papa, and in African languages, pupa! Such similarities may indicate the unity of the source. We

may have been inspired by a single power to use these elementary words and understand some of their implications, their secrets and uses. The fact that the letter B (or P) is used in all words for father, that 'M' exists in those for mother, must imply a special quality inherent in each.

I believe that each letter has its expressive peculiarities and secrets, that only a few of these secrets have been revealed. The Quran gives us those enigmatic letters at the opening of some chapters **as mysteries**. Rather than random combinations of letters, they constitute a challenge by the Quran. We are promised to have an explanation later on.

Exegetes have advanced various theories concerning these letters. Some say that God swears by them at the opening of the chapters; some say they constitute the most holy name of God, the secret of which he still keeps to himself. Some have maintained that these letters are the rudimentary material out of which, God tells us, the Quran has been built: he thus gives us a sample of the material before showing us the complete edifice, as a kind of challenge. Yet another explanation is that some of the letters constitute the names of God, e.g. A.L.R.–H.M.N. = **Al-Rahman**, i.e. The All-Merciful.

Ibn Arabi, a famous mystic, says that they belong to a kind of divine language which the angels and the divinely instructed use in managing 'cosmic affairs'. In his **al-Futoohaat al-Makkiyyah** (Meccan Conquests) Ibn Arabi says that Asif bin Barchia used these letters to bring forth the throne of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon in a glance. He calims that a divinely inspired scholar, using these letters, can turn matter into energy, energy into matter, in a glance.

All these are, of course, learned surmises, at best; only God knows which is the nearest to the truth.

We are not expected to understand the whole of the Quran in one or two generations. The Quran is designed to address all times and to reveal its secrets over the entire life span of the world, so that each interpreter can win no more than a single drop of its vast ocean.

Quranic studies remain rewarding; for the Quran unfolds its secrets to whomever is willing to approach it with an open mind and heart.

Chapter XIV

The Miracle of the Quran

The Quran is full of prophecies. Some of these were realized during the life-time of Muhammad but others will not be realized until much later, at a preappointed time.

Before the battle of **Badr**, when a few Muslims fought a huge army of infidels, revelation came down with the good tidings:

> And when God promised you one of the two parties should be yours;
>
> **The Spoils,** 7

> Certainly the host shall be routed, and turn their backs.
>
> **The Moon,** 45

and so it happened.

Before the conquest of Mecca, when to return to Mecca had seemed an unattainable dream to the Muslims in Medina (where they had been staying as emigrees), Revelation came down to confirm the Prophet's vision:

> God has indeed fulfilled the vision He vouchsafed to His Messenger truly: 'you shall enter the Holy Mosque, if

> God wills, in security, your heads shaved, your hair cut short not fearing.' He knew what you knew not, and appointed ere that a nigh victory.
>
> **Victory,** 27

and so it happened.

When the army of the Roman Empire was defeated (by the Persians) Revelation came down to Muhammad presaging victory soon to come:

> The Roman Empire has been vanquished in a land close by; but they, after their defeat, will be victors in a few years.
>
> **The Greeks,** 2–4

The Arabic word for 'few' normally denotes anything between 3 and 9; the Romans were actually victorious seven years after their defeat. Let us also consider the promise to the Israelites, wherein the Quran addresses the Jews:

> You shall do corruption in the earth twice, and you shall ascend exceedingly high.
>
> **The Night Journey,** 4

And there is it: Israel is riding high for the second time, waxing insolent in her attempt to realize her dream of conquering all the lands between the Nile and the Euphrates. But, being on the crest of a wave she must, as the Quran says, fall into a trough--into defeat.

There are other prophecies in the Quran. Some of these will warn us of the nearing Day of Doom, such as the splitting of the Moon and the rising of the smoke.

When the Quran argues it uses simple reasoning but allows no loopholes to mar its case. Of the infidel who does not believe he will be resurrected, the Quran says:

> And he has struck for Us a similitude and forgotten his creation; he says, 'who shall quicken the bones when they are decayed?'
> Say: 'He shall quicken them, who originated them the first time; He knows all creation.'
>
> **Ya Seen,** 78–79

> What, were We wearied by the first creation? No indeed; but they are in uncertainty as to the new creation.
>
> **Qaf,** 15

To prove the existence of the Creator the Quran does not offer us pages of glib philosophical arguments but simply asks a question which confounds the infidels:

> Or were they created out of nothing? Or are they the creators?
>
> **The Mount,** 35

The issue raised by these rhetorical questions has survived five thousand years of philosophizing; and the questions remain rhetorical.

To explain the elementary philosophical fact that there are for everything an ephemeral appearance and a lasting essence the Quran does not weave webs of logical arguments or sets traps of

clever deductions as the professional philosophers are wont to do; it simply leads to the truth by striking a similitude:

> As for the scum, it vanishes as jetsam,
> and what profits men abides in the earth.
> Even so God strikes His similitudes.
>
> **Thunder,** 17

And to silence all opposition the Quran strikes another similitude:

> O men, a similitude is struck; so give you ear to it. Surely those upon whom you call, apart from God, shall never create a fly, though they banded together to do it; and if a fly should rob them of aught, they would never rescue it from him. Feeble indeed alike are the seeker and the sought!
>
> **The Pilgrimage,** 73

This is an instance of man's weakness which cannot be rebutted; and a thousand years of scientific and technological development has hardly changed the situation. For who can create a fly--small, weak and insignificant though it is? If a fly robs you of your life by giving you a disease, who can restore your life? Indeed, if a fly robs you of a single particle of starch (picked up from your food) the chemical geniuses of the world will be helpless to recover it from the fly's guts, as the starch will be instantly metabolized by the digestive enzimes and turn into sugar! Feeble indeed alike are the seeker and the sought! Feeble are the chemical human wizards, the fly, and the starch particle--especially as seen against the vastness of this intractable world and infinite galaxies.

Inimitable and enigmatic in its simplicity, the Quran deals with the most complex questions, and gets them across to the simplest minds.

Like the body the soul is, according to the Quran, mortal:

> Every soul shall taste of death
>
> **The House of Imran,** 185

> It is not given to any soul to die, save by the leave of God.
>
> **The House of Imran,** 145

> Slay not the soul God has forbidden, except by right.
>
> **Cattle,** 151

In the Quran the soul may mean the sum total of desires. instincts and passions:

> Surely the soul of man incites to evil
>
> **Joseph,** 53

> So my soul prompted me
>
> **Ta Ha,** 96

It may also mean a transcendent 'reproachful' soul

> No! I swear by the Day of Resurrection.
> No! I swear by the reproachful soul.
>
> **The Resurrection,** 1–2

It is used in other contexts to imply the immortal spirit of man:

God takes the souls at the time of
their death.

The Companies, 42

As used in the Quran the **spirit** is a mystery, a divine secret. It is immortal and God takes it unto himself:

They will question thee concerning the Spirit. Say: the Spirit is of the bidding of my Lord. You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little.

The Night Journey, 85

In philosophy the spirit is no less a mystery. On the basis of tangible evidence no decisive proof of its existence may be furnished, but then it would be arbitrary to deny it, and ignorant to disregard the question altogether. It is a most insuperable problem, and our limited knowledge is simply helpless to find a satisfactory solution for it. It is much more difficult than that of God's existence.

We need hardly sum up what the Quran has to say about many other important questions to show how inimitable it is. We have already reviewed the basic Quranic ideas on the Story of Creation, on responsibility and worship.

To show the inimitability of the Quran writers often adduce the following evidence: the Quran includes many prophecies regarding the future of mankind, many reports on certain dim and distant patches of human history, information now proven correct in the light of modern science (after the lapse of a thousand years), and perfect solutions for many problems pertaining to government, ethics, law and metaphysics.

However, I believe that the inimitability of the Quran is primarily due to the mysterious feeling it evokes in the reader's

heart by the unique arrangement of its words; it is a beautiful symphony played without instruments, enchanting poetry without metre, rhyme or rhythm. Listen to what Zachariah says to his Lord:

> He said: My Lord, behold the bones within me, feeble, my head aflame with hoariness, nor was I, in calling on thee ever in misery.
>
> **Mary,** 4

or the words of Christ as a babe in arms:

> I am the servant of God; He gave me the book; he has made me a prophet; blessed he has made me wherever I may be, and he has enjoined me to pray, and to pay to charity as long as I live.
>
> **Mary,** 30–31

or the following sentence on the humility of the Messengers:

> when the signs of the All-Merciful were recited to them, they fell down prostrate and weeping
>
> **Mary,** 58

or the awful note characteristic of the encounter with God on the Day of Resurrection:

> All faces shall be humbled before him, the Living, the Self-Subsisting Eternal: hopeless indeed will be he who carries an iniquity.
>
> **Ta Ha,** 111

or consider the divine music of the Arabic words of the opening verses of **Ta Ha:** though impossible to render in English, here is what God tells his prophet Muhammad:

> Ta Ha
>
> We have not sent down the Quran upon thee to distress thee, but only as a reminder to him who fears, a revelation from Him who created the earth and the high heavens; the All-Compassionate on the Throne, is established; to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, and all that is underneath the soil. Whether thou pronouncest the word aloud or not He knoweth the secret and that yet more hidden--God, there is no god but He. To Him belong the Names most Beautiful.
>
> **Ta Ha,** 1–8

Turning to report on the infidels and the harsh punishment inflicted on them the Quran uses tunes reminiscent of brass instruments, 'harsh and grating', and the Arabic words sound more like solid pieces of rock:

> We loosed against them a wind clamorous, on a day of incessant disaster plucking up men like stumps of palm trees, uprooted.
>
> **The Moon,** 19–20

When the angels sing the glories of God and ask him to grant the believers forgiveness, the Quranic words flow like liquid gold:

> Our Lord, thou embracest every thing in mercy and knowledge; forgive those who turn in repentance and follow thy way.
>
> **Forgiver of sins,** 7

Turning in the same chapter to the Day of Doom, terror and horror seem to rear their ugly heads: the words and sentences are quite tense:

> And warn them against the Day of the Imminent, when, choking with anguish, the hearts are in the throats; the evil-doers have no loyal friend, no intercessor to be heeded.
>
> **Forgiver of Sins,** 18

Then comes expostulation when it is too late:

> O man! What deceived thee as to thy generous Lord who created thee and shaped thee and wrought thee in symmetry and composed thee after what form he would?
>
> **The splitting,** 6–8

and the good tidings--when the angels told Mary about her imminent bearing of Jesus:

> Mary, God gives thee good tidings of a Word from him whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; high honoured shall he be in this world and in the next near stationed to God.
>
> **The House of Imran,** 54

and, finally, the 'screeching' noise of the Arabic word for 'blast' **Saakhkhah** which seems to cut as sharp as a knife:

> and when the Blast shall sound upon that day when a man shall flee from his brother, his mother and father, every man that day shall have business to suffice him.
>
> **He Frowned,** 33–37

There are variations, colouring and juxtaposition of the Arabic sounds in a unique structure which is comparable to nothing ever written before or after the Quran. The amazing thing is that it all appears so easy, so simple. You could never feel any effects of workmanship, as no complexities or clever literary tricks mar the text. The words flow so easily and smoothly into one's heart to arouse that enigmatic feeling of piety before the mind wakes up to analyse the meaning, to meditate on and ponder the thoughts. The mere entry of the word into the ear means it has reached the heart, engendering that feeling which I find inscrutable. This quality of the Quranic sentence, apart from all other qualities, makes the Quran an inexplicable phenomenon among all known literary genres.

The most any author or man of letters can hope to do is express himself, offer you insights into yourself and your society, deal with well known historical facts, or predict the future on the basis of present indications, in a poem, a novel or a play. But the Quran is different from all this: it relates facts from unrecorded history, future events not borne out by the present, and scientific facts as yet undiscovered. It deals with the unseen--with facts shrouded in absolute mystery. True, some mystics are allowed by God to know a few of these mysteries,

but, revealed to them, they come to confirm what the Quran has already told us.

Besides, the Quran gives eternal words of wisdom, a constitution for an ideal life, a philosophy of ethics, judgment, theology, metaphysics, business dealings, marriage, companionship, war, peace, and worship, in a unique style of unprecedented and unequalled aesthetic qualities which can be found neither in poetry nor in poetic prose. Unprecedented, we say, but it has never and can never be equalled to the end of time.

> And if you are in doubt concerning that we have sent down on Our servant, then bring a sura like it, and call your witnesses, apart from God, if you are truthful. And if you do not--and you will not--then fear the fire, whose fuel is men and stones, prepared for unbelievers.
>
> **The Cow,** 23–24

The Quran thus challenges us to produce even a single **sura** in imitation of it, then proceeds to state with certainty that we won't be able to do so. The Quran actually states something that has been confirmed down the centuries. Over 1400 years no single imitation of the Quran has survived, in spite of the fact that numerous enemies and enviers of Islam have tried their hands at it, one time or another. Indeed, the challenge stands even today; and the Quran never ceases to reveal its secrets, confirming its inimitability:

> We shall show them our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that it is the truth.
>
> **Distinguished,** 53

This is another challenge: the future will confirm the truth of certain verses (the word for both 'signs' and 'verses' in Arabic is **Ayat**) which we still regard as enigmatic, as pertaining to the Unseen.

> What, do they not ponder the Quran? If
> it had been from other than God
> Surely they would have found in it
> much inconsistency.
>
> **Women,** 82

A major feature of the Quran is its perfect structure: apart from syntactical contingencies, no word is placed before or after another without reason. Take the fact that the habitual order of 'sight and sound' is reversed in many verses. Physiologists have today explained away this mystery; the auditory mechanism in man, they tell us, is more advanced, more complex and more delicate than the visual mechanism. The ear is superior to the eye in being capable of perceiving 'abstractions' such as musical structures, and dovetailed notation, as happens in polyphony, even while distinguishing each tune separately. A mother can distinguish her baby's crying amidst a host of interfering sounds. It all happens in a fraction of a second, of couse. The eye is, on the contrary, often deluded by the crowding details; the son is lost to his mother's eye, never to her ear; and as for the visual equivalent of music, don't we often hear of a man who 'cannot see the wood for the trees?' Moses heard God's words, but could never see him! Science provides us today with many proofs of the superiority of hearing over vision.

Though such scientific discoveries had not been made in the days when the Quran was revealed, 'hearing' is made to precede 'vision' so conspicuously in verses dealing with more than seventeen subjects:

and he appointed for you hearing and sight, and hearts, that haply so you will be thankful.

The Bee, 78

or who possesses hearing and sight, and who brings forth the living from the dead

Jonah, 31

and we appointed for them hearing, and sight, and hearts;

The Sand Dunes, 26

till when they are come to it, their hearing, their eyes and their skins bear witness against them.

Distinguished, 20

How well they will hear and see on the day they come to us!

Mary, 78

It is he who produced for you hearing, and eyes, and hearts

The Believers, 78

the hearing, the sight, the heart--all of those shall be questioned of.

The Night Journey, 36

Not so did you cover yourselves, that your hearing, your eyes and your skins should not bear witness against you;

Distinguished, 22

Say: "What think you? If God seizes your hearing and your sight?"

Cattle, 46

had God willed, He would have taken away their hearing and their sight.

The Cow, 20

Those--God has set a seal on their hearts, and their hearing, and their eyes.

The Bee, 108

The fact that the heart preceded both senses confirms that the order is one of superiority.

and yet their hearing, their sight and their hearts availed them nothing.

The Sand Dunes, 26

Those are they whom God had cursed, and so made deaf, and blinded their eyes.

Muhammad, 23

God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing

Women, 58

We created man of a sperm-drop, a mingling, trying him; and we made him hearing, seeing.

Man, 2

Like Him is naught; He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.

Counsel, 11

God hears the two of you conversing together; surely God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.

The Disputer, 1

Repeatedly and quite deliberately the Quran puts hearing before sight, although the latter is commonly held in greater esteem, and although physiology and anatomy which today establish the superiority of hearing were not known at the time.

When the Quran comes to stipulate the penalty for robbery, it mentions the male thief before the female:

And the thief, male and female: cut off the hands of both,

The Table, 38

But when it deals with fornication, the female comes first:

The fornicatress and the fornicator--scourge each one of them a hundred stripes.

Light, 2

The reason is obvious: the woman is the initiator of the sin of fornication: she invites man to it by showing off her beauty; but she is less bold than man when it comes to thieving. What we have here is, therefore, a perfect arrangement of the words and consummate precision and accuracy--"A Book whose verses are perfect," wherein no word is made to precede or follow another

without reason. Sometimes the choice of a word to fit the expression is a miracle of eloquence in itself:

> And We loose the winds fertilizing, and We send down out of heaven water, then give it you to drink, and you are not its treasurers.
>
> **El-Hijr, 22**

The use of 'fertilizing' as an epithet for the wind calls for a patient examination. The cold wind gathers clouds. It drives electrically-charged clouds to an encounter in the sky--the negatively charged clouds meet the positively charged, with ensuing lightning, thunder and rain. Does this not resemble fertilization? The metaphoric copulation of clouds produces lightning, thunder and rain! Now when rain comes down, it 'fertilizes' the earth in a different fashion (another metaphoric copulation between water and the earth). The wind also carries the pollen from one flower to another to complete another cycle of fertilization--a literal fertilization this time!

This is therefore an expression which is both literally and metaphorically true: whichever way you look at it, you'll find it to be true. Besides, it is a new and unusual epithet for the wind. Aesthetically it is simply superb, and the Arabic sound of it is unsurpassable--'We loosed the wind, fertilizing'; you read it aloud and your ear is held in enchantment and admiration.

The scientific information regarding electrically-charged clouds and the transfer of pollen was unheard of when the verse was revealed.

Exegetes have noted the metaphoric sense of the word but stopped there, explaining that the wind carries the clouds and

causes rain to fertilize the earth--so, the wind is no more than a metaphoric fertilizer. But science opens up to us the treasures of eloquence within this word: it now turns out to be true, literally and metaphorically, in part and in whole. To put it where it belongs in the verse is a miracle, no less, of precision and perfection characteristic of Quranic eloquence:

Let us take another example:

> The likeness of those who have taken to them protectors, apart from God, is as the likeness of the spider that takes to itself a house; and surely the frailest of houses is the house of the spider, did they but know.
>
> **The Spider,** 41

The fact that strikes you immediately is the reference to the 'house' of the spider, not to a cobweb. It must be significant and must have an explanation. Science tells us today that a single web is three times stronger than a comparable thread of steel, and much stronger and more flexible than a comparable one of silk. A cobweb must be, therefore, more than adequate considering the limited requirements of the spider: it should constitute (for the purposes of serving the spider) an impregnable castle. Why should the Quran say 'surely the frailest of houses is the house of the spider', then hasten to add 'did they but know'? There must be a reason.

There is in fact a biological secret which modern science has recently revealed. The truth of the matter is that the spider's house is far from being a house in the sense of being 'safe' and secure. The female spider weaves the cobweb and is the ruler therein: She kills the male immediately after mating and de-

vours him. The litter eat one another after hatching. If lucky enough, the male runs away the minute he mates the female and never tries to 'set foot' in her house again!

Apart from this, the female spider prepares her house to be a trap, designed to catch any insect that touches it. Any visitors to that house are killed and devoured instantly.

Hardly a house, then, is it? More, perhaps, like a slaughter-house where fear and anguish reign. It is the 'frailest house' to anyone seeking refuge. The Arabic word for 'frail' **(Wahan)** has connotations of extreme suffering and definite plight--which applies to those who seek others 'apart from God' for protection, help, and support:

> The likeness of those who have taken to them protectors, apart from God, is as the likeness of the spider that takes to itself a house; and surely the frailest of houses is the house of the spider, did they but know.
>
> **The Spider,** 41

It is perfection itself: precise expression, hidden meaning, rightly-placed words and secrets revealed by science a thousand years after the Prophet's death. This is no doubt a miracle which the mind can explain in no other way than by attributing it to a divine source--God.

In another **sura** (chapter), we hear of the period of time spent by the cave-sleepers in the cave:

> and they tarried in the Cave three hundred years, and to that added nine more.
>
> **The Cave,** 25

We know now, using astronomical reckoning, that the three hundred years in the solar calendar are equal to 309 years in the lunar (calculated to the day, hour and minute). As the calendar used when the verse was revealed was lunar, the Quran made this adjustment--the extra nine years being the difference. This remained a secret for a long time and has only been revealed recently.

Let us take another example:

> What, does man reckon We shall not gather his bones? Yes indeed; We are able to shape again his finger.
>
> **The Resurrection,** 3–4

God says this in the context of challenge, pointing out that the miracle of 'shaping the finger' and bringing it back to life in its original form is greater than that of reviving dead bones. This is a fact which became known to man only a thousand years after that verse was revealed: each individual has his own individual finger-prints which are not shared by any other person. Not even identical twins have the same fingerprints.

In another **sura** (chapter) we read:

> and the earth--after that he 'ovalled' it out,
>
> **The Pluckers,** 30

As mentioned before, to 'oval' means to make similar in shape to an egg--which is correct, according to the most recent views on the earth's shape. But the Arabic word also implies 'spreading out'. It is in fact the only Arabic word which has this twofold meaning, and is therefore the fittest to describe the earth which is a globe in reality but flat in appearance. It is an instance of the consummate skill in choosing the precise term. In another **sura** (chapter), the Quran says:

By heaven and what it returns, and the
earth that splits up

The Night Star, 11–12

The Quran says that the heaven returns what goes up to it (water vapour returns to us in the form of rain). We know now that the transmission of radio and television programmes is based on the same principle: the radiation is directed at the ionosphere, up there in the sky, before it is reflected back to the earth. That is the reason we can receive radio transmission from London and Paris. With the sky acting like a mirror, it can easily be described as a 'returning' agent. It also returns infra-red rays to keep the earth warm. So, God may swear by the heaven and 'what it returns to us'.

The earth is described as 'splitting'; it splits up to let out plants, natural gas, petroleum, mineral water jets, and volcano lava. And it splits literally with every earth tremor. Once again we have precise terms with comprehensive meanings, carefully chosen and arranged to perfection.

These are but a few of scores of instances. They cannot be explained in any other way: they have been revealed by God, and transmit divine rather than human knowledge. They are characterized by precision, perfect structure, and comprehensive knowledge--inimitable.

Every time you try to change the position of a word in the Quran, not to say replace it by another, you will be struck by the impossibility of the task. You will realize that you are facing a kind of linguistic and scientific 'inevitability' which is truly stunning--an instance of absolute truth. Look at the following verse dealing with bribery in the second **sura** (chapter) of the Quran:

> Consume not your moneys between you in vanity; neither use it as a bait for the judges that you may wrongfully consume a portion of other men's property--and that wittingly.
>
> **The Cow,** 188

The word 'bait' may sound 'odd' because the judge or ruler, the Arabic word allows both meanings, has a higher station in life than that of the plaintiff or any of the ruler's subjects; but the reason for this is obvious. Once he accepts a bribe, the ruler or judge will be lower in position than his subjects. The hand that gives is the upper hand; hence this perfect metaphoric expression which is impossible to replace; no other term can, in fact, be more precise and fitting.

Instances are interminable. We have unravelled the mystery of some words, but others remain mysterious. It is'a Book sublime; falsehood comes not to it from before it nor from behind it.' Science races breathlessly but has no chance of catching up with it. If we add to this that this Quran, the stunning miracle that it is, was recited by an unlettered man from the tribe of Quraish--a shepherd who tended his flocks in a desert inhabited only by bedouins and cut off from civilization and science--we shall realize the magnitude of this real miracle. No one could dispute it unless he had an obstinate, perverse mind, and deadend feelings; he would be a blind man indeed, intellectually and morally, having chosen to punish himself by shutting out from his spirit the warm light of mercy, kindness and love which radiates from that sublime Book. May God show him mercy and open up his heart to his light.

> It is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts within the breasts.
>
> **The Pilgrimage,** 46

Chapter XV

Discussions

The substance of this book appeared first in the form of articles in a Cairo weekly and aroused great interest especially among the young. Young men and women read the articles carefully but wanted more information on many points. Many of them sent in letters with views and comments--and questions. I have selected a number of 'representative' questions and included brief answers to them in this last chapter, in the hope that gaps in my argument will thus be filled.

* * *

Mahmoud al-Dusouqi, of Kafr al-Dawwar, has sent a number of questions for which he would like 'satisfactory' answers:

First, he says that God tells us in the Quran that he alone knows all about unborn children 'still in the womb'. How could this be true, he asks, when there are today scientific methods of determining the baby's sex--say by tissue and blood analysis, and sometimes by X-raying? A physician can in fact tell whether a woman will have a boy or a girl, can't he?

The reader has in mind the verse: 'He knows what it is in the wombs' (**Loqman,** 34) thinking that it refers to God's knowledge of the baby's sex. But this is a narrow, if not also a wrong interpretation. The true meaning is that God has knowledge of your entire 'history' on earth, that is, the story of your life and your destiny, even while you are still a foetus in your mother's uterus, not merely whether you would be a boy

or a girl. Being of either sex is a secondary detail and is definitely of no consequence; it cannot be the intended reference for divine knowledge. God's knowledge is vast and comprehensive.

You can rest assured that the doctor who can, by placing his stethoscope on your mother's belly, gain knowledge of everyday of your future life on earth has not been, and will never be, created!

Brother Dusouqi denies man's freedom of choice, insisting that man, for all my lengthy argument, is forced to do what he does, and that he has no choice whatsoever but is driven willy nilly to his fate. I have no better reply than the following brief question: can't you distinguish between the capacity of your hand to move **as you want it to do** (and, perhaps, write anything **you want**) and its incapacity when feverishly shaking? You can, can't you, distinguish the two kinds of movement, describing the first as a free movement, the second as forced. If in both cases you were forced, you could never distinguish them, could you? So much for that.

Brother Dusouqi concludes by saying that the West advanced by relinquishing religion, that we are backward because of our adherence to it. He claims that 'religiosity' is the quality of the backward and helpless. He asks me further: what is the source of our modern sciences? Isn't it the atheist West?

My answer: It is unfair to state that we are religious. It is unfair to us, to religion and to reality. The truth is that we are lazy and passive impostors! We are religious only in name; for religion commands us emphatically to work:

> Say: 'Work; and God will surely see
> your work.
>
> **Repentance,** 105

commands us to learn:

> and say, 'O my Lord, increase me in knowledge.'
>
> **Ta Ha,** 114

commands us to be truthful and sincere:

> Very hateful is it to God, that you say what you do not.
>
> **The Ranks,** 3

and commands us to struggle:

> Persevere in patience and constancy; vie in such perseverance; strengthen each other;
>
> **The House of Imran,** 200

Have we heeded the command? No, indeed! We scream when the prices of nuts go up or when hazelnuts are in short supply! **Ramadan,** the month of fasting, has turned into a month of feasting. Prayers are advertized and publicized, with jarring loudspeakers bellowing about! The tenor of our life is 'getting and spending', the accumulation of wealth that is left behind. The majority are illiterate, ignorant and lazy. Whom are you trying to deceive? We are backward because we do not act according to the dictates of our religion, not because we are religious.

On the other hand, you should not be deceived by the glittering shop-window of the West: it does not indicate any advancement! Sweden may boast the highest rates of income and the highest standards of living, but the rate of lunacy and

suicide in Sweden is equally the highest in the world. In Britain the off-beat, or anti-establishment young have become an establishment in themselves, living on marijuana in lotos-land-- on the pavements! In the United States the Hippies have set up 'physical liquidation' societies. The 'sane' do not stop at individual killing, but wallow in mass murder. What did Hitler do? What happened in Germany? Millions were killed, skinned and burnt up in concentration camps. The United States (no less noble!) dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to kill more than seven million people.

Capitalist monopolies kill in their own way.

The colonialists exterminate whole peoples in Vietnam and Africa.

Do you call this progress?

Believe me, progress is not the possession of a Cadillac and a television set; you are deluded by the false glitter. Gandhi possessed nothing apart from his personal wool spindle, and walked about half naked; he wanted to disseminate love, and ate nothing but dates and milk. He never tasted the sophisticated dishes of French cuisine. He prayed to God; he read verses from the Quran, the Gospel, the Torah, and Buddhist scripture; he recognized all the Messengers of God.

Gandhi is a symbol of progress--not the Cadillac.

For it is through love that man can truly be a 'human' being; and it is through faith and the upholding of the Truth that man can be rich--not through ephemeral worldly possessions.

You tell me that a scientist who makes a discovery is, according to you, much better than a hermit, a monk or even a saint. Well, what is your definition of a saint? A real saint is a

scientist in his own way, a man of knowledge who makes discoveries. Mendel, who discovered the laws of heredity, was a monk and lived in a monastery. You don't, apparently, understand what it means to be religious; you seem to think that a religious person must sit on the pavement, complete with rosary, doing nothing, reading nothing.

Let me tell you this: you will not be religious unless you have abnegated yourself, worked entirely to enhance **other** people's happiness, and turned your life into an uninterrupted chain of acts of love and kindness, without hope of reward, free of hate, envy, malice and passiveness.

You will not be religious except through learning: you cannot serve God with ignorance. Nor was Einstein ignorant when he admitted God's existence.

* * *

Brother Taha al-Dusouqi Hebaishi, currently reading for a degree in philosophy, has a number of observations on my argument regarding the story of creation according to which the Quran **does** refer to evolution.

Brother Taha says that Darwin's ideas on the subject lack material evidence and cannot therefore constitute a theory; they are at best a hypothesis. Can we accept a mere hypothesis, he asks, and proceed to corroborate it with verses from the Quran?

Brother Taha forgets, however, that I reject Darwin's 'theory' as such but only accept the definite anatomical facts which prove beyond a shadow of doubt that all living things belong to one family with certain organic links.

Theoretical Darwinism proposes that evolution from the lowest 'branch' of that family tree to the highest takes place in

accordance with a law which Darwin calls the 'struggle for survival'. This is the theoretical aspect which may be accepted or rejected because it is Darwin's own deduction or interpretation. I have rejected it and have in my argument given the reasons for this. But the anatomical facts are sufficiently tangible--a certainty which may not be called in question.

Brother Taha says that the verse 'He created you by stages' occurs in a speech by Noah to his people:

> what ails you, that you look not for
> majesty in God seeing that he created
> you by stages?
>
> **Noah,** 14

and since Noah's people, he continues, knew nothing about Darwin, it would only be natural to explain the 'stages' as those of childhood, youth and old age, or the stages of an embryo's life in the uterus at most. My reply is that the Quran is meant to address people at all times, that its words were divine and have meanings which are therefore unlimited to any one occasion or time. The words of the Quran reveal a new depth to people down the centuries; and the more our knowledge, the more will be our ability to understand these words. This is the difference between God's words and the topical statements. You would be making a grave mistake if you confined the meaning of a given verse to the contingencies of its occasion.

Brother Taha reads the following verse differently:

> Was there not a period of time when
> man was a thing insignificant?
>
> **Man,** 1

He says that 'period of time' must refer to the 'clay stage', that is, the period before Adam became a living man (before God

breathed his spirit into him). He says that Adam is the absolute beginning, and there cannot be a 'previous stage' to him. Let me ask brother Taha: are you certain of this? How can you attain such certainty? Surely this is your own interpretation! At any rate, you may be right; and I may be wrong. God only knows.

* * *

Brother Mostafa Mahmoud Ahmad, of Hilwan, sends in five questions, or rather five puzzles:

First, he asks me about the people who go to Hell. Are they doomed to stay there for ever, or, perhaps, be released? If so, when?

Second, if Hell-fire is the natural punishment of the Hereafter for the sins we commit in this world, can our trials and tribulations in this world be a punishment for other sins, committed, perhaps in pre-existence times which God only knows about? If so, how?

Third, you referred in your articles to a previous life in the Divine Kingdom, prior, that is, to our birth and even prenatal life. Where, I wonder, is that Kingdom? What kind of life can it have?

Fourth, if our suffering in this world is the consequence of mistakes made in life, how would you explain the fact that some are doomed to suffering from birth? A boy may be born blind or with a malformation while his twin brother is normal and healthy?

Fifth, do you believe that we had lived a previous life on earth? In other words, do you believe in what the Indians call the 'transmigration of souls'?

My answer to the five questions is: **God knows**.

* * *

Hussein al-Qadi, of the Higher Industrial Institute, Mansourah, opens a debate on the question of freedom versus necessity by saying:

You claim to be free and have a choice. Your evidence is that 'free' area within you--that kind of 'no man's land' which you describe as the region of intention which God allows to be free. You state that if your intention is bad you will be punished, if good you will be rewarded; that is to say, a black or a white intention is what determines our destiny. But let me ask you: who is the creator of this black intention? Hasn't God created everything?

Let me answer this query by citing the following Quranic verse:

> By the soul, and that which shaped it
> and inspired it to lewdness and godfearing!
>
> **The Sun,** 7–8

The verse says explicitly that the soul is inspired to both roads at the same time--the one to lewdness, the other to godfearing. It is up to the soul to choose. If the verse meant **either** road, an **or** would have been used instead of the conjunction **and**. The same thing occurs elsewhere:

> We guided him on the two highways.
>
> **The Land,** 10

The two highways are those of good and bad, both at the same time, which allow man the freedom to choose. Besides, God

tells us in His Book that he doesn't create a black 'soul' or goad men to sin:

> Say: "God does not command indecency; what, do you say concerning God such things as you know not?" Say: "My Lord has commanded justice. Let your faces in every place of worship.
>
> **The Battlements,** 28–29

and elsewhere:

> Satan promises you poverty, and bids you unto indecency; but God promises you his pardon and his bounty;
>
> **The Cow,** 268

This is all quite clear and unequivocal.

God does not force anyone to commit a sin; he simply provides the concrete conditions for our choice. But in the deepest depths of our being there exists a spiritual core--an inner self--that is completely free.

* * *

Brother Ismat ventures a quaint interpretation of the verse--

> The Hour has drawn nigh: the moon is split
>
> **The Moon,** 1

according to which the moon is a symbol of the atom which has already been split. He argues that atomic fission is one of the signs that the Hour is near. 'Isn't the atom', he concludes, 'so similar to the Moon?'

Let me now ask him: why shouldn't the Moon be the actual Moon? The word is clear and should be taken literally. Besides, the atom does not look like the moon at all, does it?

* * *

Engineer Adham Sulayman, of 'Alaqmah, ash-Sharqiyah, also subscribes to the view that the Hour is near. He cites a Prophet's tradition (reported by Muslim) concerning the return of Christ at the end of time, which says: ''The Son of Mary will surely come down as a fair judge''. He says that some 'brother' mystics who may be trusted have had a revelation, namely that the Hour would take place in 1980 when the unjust Jewish State would be dissolved. He further states that this statement occurs in a book called **Calling to Mind Matters of the Hereafter**.

Well, I don't know whether Christ will be coming down to solve which problems--perhaps those of Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchia as well? Are we supposed to wait for Christ's second coming in the hope of solving our earthly problems?

There has been actually a good deal of talk about the return of the Messiah; but no Quranic verses confirm such a return. In fact the Quran denies that Christ was killed and crucified; it says only that the Jews thought they had killed and crucified him. However, God says to Jesus:

> When God said, 'Jesus, I will take thee
> to Me and will raise thee to Me.
> **The House of Imran**, 55

The drift of this is that crucifixion didn't take place, but that the Messiah died and God raised him in spirit to him. There is another interpretation of the verse according to which the clause 'take thee to Me' should not imply death, but the 'fulfilment of recompense' or simply 'fulfilment'.

Some exegetes believe that was only the 'lesser death', that is, 'sleep', and that Jesus is having a prolonged slumber like the cave-sleepers, and that he must, therefore, come back. But there is no evidence to support this view. It is all guesswork, in fact, just like the arguments about the coming of the Mahdi at the end of time.

These and similar ideas reflect a craving by the people of our time for the guidance of prophets. Alas! The time of prophecy is gone. We must explain that we have to fight for salvation on the basis of the holy scriptures already revealed.

* * *

A colleage, a Dr. Rushdi al-Badrawi, says that he spent a long time pondering a paragraph in my article on the Hour. This concerns the fact that God favours those servants of his who 'fear their Lord in the Unseen', and those whe believe in their heart without plunging into argumentation and logical mazes--without insisting on having concrete and tangible proof. He asks me: How do you explain Abraham's request to God to show him how he revives the dead? Or the request by Moses to see God? Or the request by the disciples to have a table come down to them from Heaven or, indeed, how God responded and gave them what they wanted?

My answer is that the rank of a prophet is different. It is only natural for a prophet to be provided with an extra dose of certainty, in view of the magnitude of the responsibility he would shoulder--the establishment of a new religion, confrontation with tyrannical opposition and persecution by the ignorant. He must have absolute certainty!

And though the disciples were not prophets, they were to go through a good deal of suffering. You have heard, haven't you,

of the persecution of the disciples and the suffering of the early Christians. They were tortured, burnt at the stake, hanged, or thrown to the wild beasts. We are spared all these risks, are we not? There can be no risk involved in belief today.

Even so, Moses was taught a lesson when he asked to see God. He was duly stunned when he saw what happened to the mountain. When he came round, God addressed him:

> take what I have given thee, and be of
> the thankful.
>
> **The Battlements,** 144

In other words God commands him not to ask for more than he was already given.

God favours belief in the Unseen out of mercy and kindness so the believer in the Unseen may be excused if he makes a mistake or even commits a sin; and he may receive forgiveness if he repents. After all, he cannot see--and he believes in what he cannot see!

On the other hand, if a man was given the privilege of witnessing the Unseen, none of his mistakes, however slight, may be forgiven. There can be no excuse for him: he would be relentlessly taken to account for any disobedience, and severely punished for it. When the disciples had their table from heaven, God told them:

> Verily I do send it down to you whoso
> of you hereafter disbelieves, verily I
> shall chastise him with a chastisement
> wherewith I chastise no other being.
>
> **The Table,** 115

It is a terrible threat never made to any one else.

This applies to any man who is fortunate enough to have the 'mask of mortality' lifted from his eyes, even for brief spaces of time, so that he may witness something of the Unseen. 'Fortunate' we say, though saints are not to be envied for being so near to God: they would receive the harshest punishment if they disobeyed him.

God's command to his servants to believe in the Unseen is therefore an act of kindness.

As for those who would not believe until they have witnessed the 'signs' of the Hour with their own eyes, they will be regarded as disbelievers. They had been heedless to the signs in the Quran, in the earth and sky, and in themselves. They had the chance to think and feel and so arrive at the Truth independently. If you come across someone who makes it a condition for belief that the moon be split, that Gog and Magog storm the world, and that a beast of the earth talk to them, he must be really and truly a disbeliever.

* * *

Abdul-Fattah Isawi, Dokki, Cairo, sends a bold letter. He says: In your **Modern Interpretation** you have not said anything about the quiddity of God--what and who is he? Is he a living being in the usual sense of living? Will you unravel this mystery?

Let me tell brother Abdul-Fattah: How odd of you! Do you know who you are so that you may enquire about the quiddity of God? All you know about yourself is your name and a number of qualities and actions; but you do not know anything at all about the **essence of you** which you call 'self'. Similarly, all we know about God is his names, his attributes and actions;

everything else about him belongs in the absolute Unseen. And if your understanding of yourself is impossible, your understanding of God must be more than impossible! To attempt that is to undergo unbearable, infinite and futile human suffering:

> Yet they dispute about God who is mighty in power;
>
> **Thunder,** 13

> God warns you that you beware of him
>
> **The House of Imran,**28

The latter verse means that God warns people not to inquire into His quiddity, to heed His chatisement and remember His power. If you persist in your attempt to find out more about God's undiscussable, to analyse the unanalysable. You may end up destroying yourself.

Can you hold in your arms something impossible to hold?

If you persist in this foolish attempt wouldn't you hurt your arms?

As commonsense forbids it, religion forbids us to talk about God's 'self'; we are thus spared the suffering and shown mercy.

* * *

Little Mai, of Nasr City, Cairo (though her letter belies her tender age) says:

> 'I feel God's presence in the magnificence of the heavens, in the warmth of the sun, the light of the moon, the twinkling of the stars. I can feel His attributes in the full blown roses and the

> sparkling dew drops. I can see Him in
> my eyesight and the pulse of kindness
> in my heart.'

Little Mai believes that my article on the Spirit was neither satisfactory nor adequate. She said that I evaded the question 'what is the spirit' and goes on to ask: What is the scientific explanation of what is popularly described as a 'meeting of spirits'? Has love anything to do with the spirit? Can there be any kind of contact between the spirits of the living and those of the dead? Where do the spirits go when we sleep? Do they go to the same **Barzakh** (isthmus) inhabited by the spirits of the dead? When he made his night journey to Jerusalem, thence to ascend the heavens, was our Prophet travelling in spirit solely or in both body and spirit?

Little Mai's questions are big ones! Let us have a bash at them!

The 'meeting of spirits' cannot be explained in scientific terms, unless we seek a metaphor from radio. I can think of two transmitters radiating on the same frequency so that both broadcasts are heard simultaneously when the receiver is adjusted to receive that frequency. The metaphor is inadequate, I know, but it is the only one I can think of.

Love is, I believe, an attribute and a function of the spirit. But the love I mean is not the Romeo & Juliet kind of passion; it is akin to the love which Gandhi, Tagore and Jesus Christ had for humanity--for benevolence, beauty, truth and lofty ideals. Romeo's love for Juliet, or Hassan's for Na'ima, can be nothing more than the natural outcome of the activity of the sex hormones, the lovers having reached manhood and womanhood respectively. The spirit has nothing to do with it.

As for possible contact between the spirits of the living and the dead, it may, I think, take place in visions and dreams in a manner unknown to us.

The story of Muhammad's night journey and ascension to the heavens provides an instance of the contact between his spirit and those of God's prophets. He led at their prayer at **al-Aqsa** Mosque and actually met them on his way up to the heavens. Whether the trip was performed in body or in spirit, nobody can tell. It would be, I believe, irrelevant if the question was meant to indicate God's power. God is All-Mighty; it is His power that keeps millions of stars suspended in their orbits, governed by His perfect laws, and we hardly need miracles to prove His capacity for raising matter in the air. It is not surprising that Muhammad should make the trip both physically and spiritually.

Where do the spirits go in sleep? God tells us that He 'takes' them as He takes the spirits of the dead. The difference is, however, that He gives them back to us while the spirits of the dead are not returned.

Where does He keep them until they are returned? At the **Barzakh** of the dead or at some other **barzakh**? We have no answer to that and, indeed, the Arabic word itself remains a mystery. As I explained in my articles, it does not refer to a place but to separation as a result of the different laws governing the two worlds. Once the spirit leaves the body it becomes subject to different laws; the living and the dead have laws peculiar to them and so their separation is inevitable. This separation, this **barzakh** (call it the great divide, the partition or the barrier) cannot be crossed except by a miracle or a God-granted power. That is why the dead remain separated from the living until the Day of Resurrection.

* * *

Brother Saifullah Ahmed Fadil has a different view of the spirit. He says that man has no spirit but simply a soul which survives him. The 'Spirit', he says, is one of the names of Archangel Gabriel; he is the Holy Spirit, and he is the Faithful Spirit. Man consists of nothing more than a body and a soul--a body that dies and a soul that remains.

Now let me ask brother Saifullah: How could you explain the following straightforward verses:

> Every soul shall taste of death;
>
> **The House of Imran,** 185
>
> No soul knows in what land it shall die.
> **Loqman,** 34
>
> It is not given to any soul to die, save by the leave of God, at an appointed time.
>
> **The House of Imran,** 145

They explicitly state that, like the body, the soul dies; what remains after death is some thing else. The word 'soul' has many senses in the Quran. It occurs in various contexts to mean (1) the low animalistic soul which 'incites to evil'; (2) the high, lofty and 'reproachful' soul; (3) the immortal spirit; or (4) the man or the individual. God breathed His spirit into Adam. The Messiah is the Word of God, the Spirit of God, sent to Mary. The spirit is God's gift to Adam and his progeny--a definite Quranic fact. The spirit of which we speak differs, of course, from the Holy Spirit or the Faithful Spirit--the two names given to Gabriel. It also differs from the 'absolute Spirit' which ascends to God with the angels on that day which is 50,000 years long.

The spirit is a mystery. All we know about it is that it comes from God and that it is immortal. Brother Saifullah concludes his letter with a beautiful quotation from the Gospel where Christ is critical of grief and crying over the dead.

* * *

Brother Dr. Rushdi al-Badrawi has another question concerning the lawful and unlawful. He says: Why did God forbid the Israelites to eat any animals with claws?

> And to those of Jewry We have forbidden every beast with claws;
>
> **Cattle,** 146

What is the reason for this?

The answer is: that injunction had a different reason from comparable forbiddings in Islam. It was to punish the Israelites that God forbade them that, while we, Moslems, are only forbidden to eat what is bad for us (anything that is harmful). Here is the explicit verse concerning the Jews:

> And for the evildoing of those of Jewry, we have forbidden them certain good things that were permitted to them.
>
> **Women,** 160

The reason for the forbidding is different--it is a forbidding for punishment.

Dr. Badrawi asks another question: why should Christians be allowed only one wife, while Muslims are allowed four?

In Islam polygamy is, in point of fact, conditional on 'equity'-- a very hard condition indeed. 'But if you fear you will not

be equitable, then only one' (**Women,** 3) says the Quran, then adds that such 'equity' is impossible, 'you will not be able to be equitable between your wives, be you ever so eager' (**Women**, 129). It is a 'possible' which no one will find possible! We are, therefore, still advised to have one wife, as the permission to have more is fraught with grave restrictions.

The reason for this apparent 'permission' to have four wives was that in pre-Islamic days a man married ten or twenty women; and the limitation to four was quite an improvement. 'Four' may suggest 'many' to today's reader, but it meant 'less' when the verse was revealed.

Dr. Badrawi concludes his letter by a question on alcohol. Would it be lawful if taken for medicinal purposes? To illustrate what he calls 'medical necessity' he cites the tension of today's world, the stress and strain, anxiety and so on--destructive to body and soul. He wonders why alcohol may not be taken in moderation, the right measure being two or three glasses of, say, wine but no more? As long as one keeps away from drunkenness, why not use alcohol to relieve the pressures of modern life?

The conditions you mention, Dr. Badrawi, do not create a 'medical necessity'. Besides, alcohol does not relieve nervous pressure; on the contrary, it lessens man's ability to withstand pressure, because it erodes his will power. Indeed, to be a slave to alcohol is to lack will power. The greater the addiction, the weaker one's will gets.

If the conditions you refer to constituted a 'medical necessity' requiring as you say two or three glasses of wine before going to bed, alcohol ought to have been included in the ration books alongside sugar, oil and kerosene; it would be distributed to people as an essential food, wouldn't it?

No, I cannot agree with you. I still believe that by forbidding drinking alcohol the Quran is showing great kindness and mercy to man and society alike. 'Nervous pressures' are indications of unusual situations or problems requiring a solution. To have 'one or two' drinks as a means of escape is to keep all problems unsolved--which is hardly acceptable to God or, indeed, to anyone.

* * *

Brother M.H., of Aleppo, Syria, contributes 'original' views on four of the puzzles referred to in the article on the Unseen, namely the Pen, the Tablet, the Throne, and the Chair.

Our Syrian brother says that God created man in the image of his beautiful names. 'And he taught Adam the names, all of them'. Man is the creature where these names, these qualities or attributes, are shown. He is also capable of receiving divine revelation. Man must be, therefore, the comprehensive book, and the physical world the pages in this book. Man is the microcosm where the vast universe can be seen: all the facts of existence are therein to be found. God says in a **Qudsi** verse:

> My earth and my heaven are not vast enough for me; the heart of my faithful servant is.

The Quran says that His Chair is big enough to take in both heaven and earth; so the Chair must refer here to the Mind which alone, indeed, can 'take in', that is, grasp both heaven and earth. Isn't man's mind capable enough for the understanding of the earth and the heaven? Doesn't it deal with astronomical problems, propound ideas and make calculations which are proved right by space travellers? God's statement that the heart of his faithful servant is vast enough means that man's

Heart is the Throne, the mind being the Chair. Man's body must be the Tablet on which God writes (that is on the genes in the cells of the embryo) the destiny and future life of man.

The Syrian brother's view is a mystical one.

Still, I do not see how it can explain the verse:

> Upon that day eight shall carry above
> the Throne of the Lord.
>
> **The Indubitable,** 17

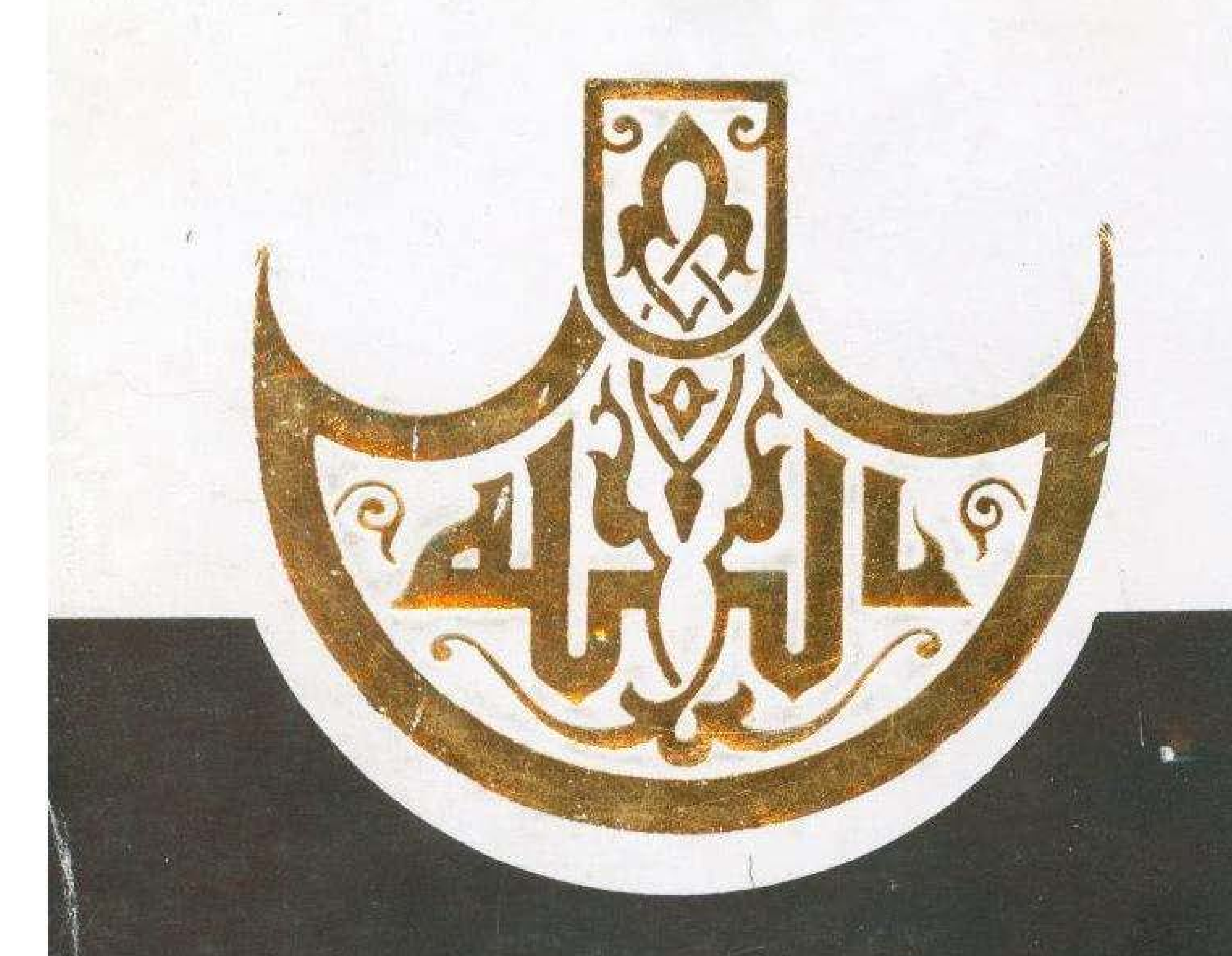
If the Throne refers to man's heart, how can it be carried by eight--(eight what, incidentally?) on the Day of Resurrection? Perhaps it is a metaphor, the gist being that we shall witness the heart and realize the great part it plays on that day?

The interpretation relies too much on guesswork to provide any certain conclusions. Better than this is what Ibn Abbas has to say about God's Chair: 'God's Chair is his knowledge.' The Chair is used adjectivally to indicate God's comprehensive knowledge. Better than both interpretations, say: God knows!

رقم الإيداع	١٩٩٩/١٨٢١١
الترقيم الدولى	977-02-5960-8 ISBN

٢/٩٩/٢٠٠

طبع بمطابع دار المعارف (ج . م . ع .)



Dr. Mostafa Mahmoud is by far the leading writer and television speaker on science and religion in the Arab world today. His influence is great, his following immense. He represents the 'spirit of the age' and to understand him is to understand a central current of thought in our part of the world and the way of life that is being formed by that thought.

A best seller in Arabic, this book presents a fresh view of Islam--a new 'reading' of the Quran in the light of modern science and philosophy.

The translator, Dr. M. M. Enani, is an Associate Professor at the Unibersity of Cairo. He is a playwright-critic and an experienced translator.